

## Foreword

Have you ever stood on the seashore, with the breakers rolling at your feet, and imagined what the scene would be like if the ocean water were gone? I have had a vision of that many times. Standing on the Atlantic Coast, gazing out toward Spain, I can envisage myself, not down at the sea-level, but upon the brink of a height. Spain and the coast of Europe, off there upon another height.

Fantastic and sinister are the Lowlands into which Philip Grant descends on his dangerous assignment.

And the depths between? Unreal landscape! Mysterious realm which now we call the bottom of the sea! Worn and rounded crags; bloated mud-plains; noisome reaches of ooze which once were the cold and dark and silent ocean floor, caked and drying in the sun. And off to the south the little fairy mountain tops of the West Indies rearing their verdured crowns aloft.

"Look around, Chief. See where I am?"

If the ocean water were gone! Can you picture it? A new world, greater in area than all the land we now have. They would call the former sea-level the zero-height, perhaps. The depths would go down as far beneath it as Mount Everest towers above it. Aeroplanes would fly down into them.

And I can imagine the settlement of these vast new realms: New little nations being created, born of man's indomitable will to conquer every adverse condition of inhospitable nature.

A novel setting for a story of adventure. It seems so to me. Can you say that the oceans will never drain of their water? That an earthquake will not open a rift—some day in the future—and lower the water into subterranean caverns? The volume of water of all the oceans is no more to the volume of the earth than a tissue paper wrapping on an orange.

Is it too great a fantasy? Why, reading the facts of what happened in 1929, it is already prognosticated. The fishing banks off the Coast of Newfoundland have suddenly sunk. Cable ships repairing a broken cable,

snapped by the earthquake of November 18th, 1929, report that for distances of a hundred miles on the Grand Banks the cables have disappeared into unfathomable depths. And before the subterranean cataclysm, they were within six hundred feet of the surface. And all the bottom of that section of the North Atlantic seems to have caved in. Ten thousand square miles dropped out of the bottom of the ocean! Fact, not fancy.

And so let us enlarge the picture. Let us create the Lowlands—twenty thousand feet below the zero-height—the setting for a tale of adventure. The romance of the mist-shrouded deeps. And the romance of little Jetta.

## **Chapter 1: The Secret Mission**

I was twenty-five years of age that May evening of 2020 when they sent me south into the Lowlands. I had been in the National Detective Service Bureau, and then was transferred to the Customs Department, Atlantic Lowlands Branch. I went alone; it was best, my commander thought. An assignment needing diplomacy rather than a show of force.

It was 9 P. M. when I catapulted from the little stage of Long Island airport. A fair, moonlit evening—a moon just beyond the full, rising to pale the eastern stars. I climbed about a thousand feet, swung over the headlands of the Hook, and, keeping in the thousand-foot local lane, took my course.

My destination lay some thirteen hundred miles southeast of Great New York. I could do a good normal three-ninety in this fleet little Wasp, especially if I kept in the rarer air-pressures over the zero-height. The thousand-foot lane had a southward drift, this night. I was making now well over four hundred; I would reach Nareda soon after midnight.

The Continental Shelf slid beneath me, dropping away as my course took me further from the Highland borders. The Lowlands lay patched with inky shadows and splashes of moonlight. Domes with upstanding, rounded heads; plateaus of naked black rock, ten thousand feet below the zero-height; trenches, like valleys, ridged and pitted, naked in places like a pockmarked lunar landscape. Or again, a pall of black mist would shroud it all, dark curtain of sluggish cloud with moonlight tinging its edges pallid green.

To my left, eastward toward the great basin of the mid-Atlantic Lowlands, there was always a steady downward slope. To the right, it came up over the continental shelf to the Highlands of the United States.

There was often water to be seen in these Lowlands. A spring-fed lake far down in a caldron pit, spilling into a trench; low-lying, land-locked little seas; cañons, some of them dry, others filled with tumultuous flowing water. Or great gashes with water sluggishly flowing, or standing with a heavy slime, and a pall of uprising vapor in the heat of the night.

At 37°N. and 70°W., I passed over the newly named Atlas Sea. A lake of water here, more than a hundred miles in extent. Its surface lay fifteen thousand feet below the zero-height; its depth in places was a full three thousand. It was clear of mist to-night. The moonlight shimmered on its rippled surface, like pictures my father had often shown me of the former oceans.

I passed, a little later, well to the westward of the verdured mountain top of the Bermudas.

There was nothing of this flight novel to me. I had frequently flown over the Lowlands; I had descended into them many times. But never upon such a mission as was taking me there now.

I was headed for Nareda, capital village of the tiny Lowland Republic of Nareda, which only five years ago came into national being as a protectorate of the United States. Its territory lies just north of the mountain Highlands of Haiti, Santo Domingo and Porto Rico. A few hundred miles of tumbled Lowlands, embracing the turgid Nares Sea, whose bottom is the

lowest point of all the Western Hemisphere—some thirty thousand feet below the zero-height.

The village of Nareda is far down indeed. I had never been there. My charts showed it on the southern border of the Nares Sea, at minus twenty thousand feet, with the Mona Valley behind it like a gash in the steep upward slopes to the Highlands of Porto Rico and Haiti.

Nareda has a mixed population of typical Lowland adventures, among which the hardy Dutch predominate; and Holland and the United States have combined their influence in the World Court to give it national identity.

And out of this had arisen my mission now. Mercury—the quicksilver of commerce—so recently come to tremendous value through its universal use in the new antiseptics which bid fair to check all human disease—was being produced in Nareda. The import duty into the United States was being paid openly enough. But nevertheless Hanley's agents believed that smuggling was taking place.

It was to investigate this condition that Hanley was sending me. I had introduction to the Nareda government officials. I was to consult with Hanley by ether-phone in seeking the hidden source of the contraband quicksilver, but, in the main, to use my own judgment.

A mission of diplomacy. I had no mind to pry openly among the people of these Lowland depths, looking for smugglers. I might, indeed, find them too unexpectedly! Over-curious strangers are not welcomed by the Lowlanders. Many have gone into the depths and have never returned....

I was above the Nares Sea, by midnight. I was still flying a thousand feet over the zero-height. Twenty-one thousand feet below me lay the black expanse of water. The moon had climbed well toward the zenith, now. Its silver shafts penetrated the hanging mist-stratas. The surface of the Nares Sea was visible—dark and sullen looking.

I shifted the angles of incidence of the wings, re-set my propeller angles and made the necessary



carburetor adjustments, switching on the supercharger which would supply air at normal zero-height pressure to the carburetors throughout my descent.

I swung over Nareda. The lights of the little village, far down, dwarfed by distance, showed like bleary, winking eyes through the mists. The jagged recesses of the Mona valley were dark with shadow. The Nares Sea lay like some black monster asleep, and slowly, heavily panting. Moonlight was over me, with stars and fleecy white clouds. Calm, placid, atmospheric night was up here. But beneath, it all seemed so mysterious, fantastic, sinister.

My heart was pounding as I put the Wasp into a spiral and forced my way down.

## **Chapter 2: The Face at the Window**

With heavy, sluggish engines I panted down and came to rest in the dull yellow glow of the field lights. A new world here. The field was flat, caked ooze, cracked and hardened. It sloped upward from the shore toward where, a quarter of a mile away, I could see the dull lights of the settlement, blurred by the gathered night vapors.

The field operator shut off his permission signal and came forward. He was a squat, heavy-set fellow in wide trousers and soiled white shirt flung open at his thick throat. The sweat streamed from his forehead. This oppressive heat! I had discarded my flying garb in the descent. I wore a shirt, knee-length pants, with hose and wide-soled shoes of the newly fashioned Lowland design. What few weapons I dared carry were carefully concealed. No alien could enter Nareda bearing anything resembling a lethal weapon.

My wide, thick-soled shoes did not look suspicious for one who planned much walking on the caked Lowland ooze. But those fat soles were cleverly fashioned to

hide a long, keen knife-blade, like a dirk. I could lift a foot and get the knife out of its hidden compartment with fair speed. This I had in one shoe.

In the other, was the small mechanism of a radio safety recorder and image finder, with its attendant individual audiophone transmitter and receiver. A miracle of smallness, these tiny contrivances. With batteries, wires and grids, the whole device could lay in the palm of one's hand. Once past this field inspection I would rig it for use under my shirt, strapped around my chest. And I had some colored magnesium flares.

The field operator came panting.

"Who are you?"

"Philip Grant. From Great New York." I showed him my name etched on my forearm. He and his fellows searched me, but I got by.

"You have no documents?"

"No."

My letter to the President of Nareda was written with invisible ink upon the fabric of my shirt. If he had heated it to a temperature of 180°F. or so, and blown the fumes of hydrochloric acid upon it, the writing would have come out plain enough.

I said, "You'll house and care for my machine?"

They would care for it. They told me the price—swindlingly exorbitant for the unwary traveller who might wander down here.

"All correct," I said cheerfully. "And half that much more for you and your men if you give me good service. Where can I have a room and meals?"

"Spawn," said the operator. "He is the best. Fat-bellied from his own good cooking. Take him there, Hugo."

I had a gold coin instantly ready; and with a few additional directions regarding my flyer, I started off.

It had been hot and oppressive standing in the field; it was infinitely worse climbing the mud-slope into the village; but my carrier, trudging in advance of me along the dark, winding path up the slope, shouldered my bag and seemed not to notice the effort. We passed occasional tube-lights strung on poles. They illumined the heavy rounded crags. A tumbled region, this slope which once was the ocean floor twenty thousand feet below the surface. Rifts were here like gulleys; little buttes reared their rounded, dome heads. And there were caves and crevices in which deep sea fish once had lurked.

For ten minutes or so we climbed. It was past the midnight hour; the village was asleep. We entered its outposts. The houses were small structures of clay. In the gloom they looked like drab little beehives set in unplanned groups, with paths for streets wandering between them.

Then we came to a more prosperous neighborhood. The street widened and straightened. The clay houses, still with rounded dome like tops, stood back from the road, with wooden front fences, and gardens and shrubbery. The windows and doors were like round finger-holes plugged in the clay by a giant hand. Occasionally the windows, dimly lighted, stared like sleeping giant eyes.

There were flowers in all the more pretentious private gardens. Their perfume, hanging in the heavy night air, lay on the village, making one forget the over-curtain of stenching mist. Down by the shore of the Nares Sea, this world of the depths had seemed darkly sinister. But in the village now, I felt it less ominous. The scent of the flowers, the street lined in one place by arching giant fronds drowsing and nodding overhead—there seemed a strange exotic romance to it. The sultry air might almost have been sensuous.

"Much further, Hugo?"

"No. We are here."

He turned abruptly into a gateway, led me through a garden and to the doorway of a large, rambling, one-story building. The news of my coming had preceded me. A front room was lighted; my host was waiting.

Hugo set down my bag, accepted another gold coin; and with a queer sidelong smile, the incentive for which I had not the slightest idea, he vanished. I fronted my host, this Jacob Spawn. Strange fate that should have led me to Spawn! And to little Jetta!

Spawn was a fat-bellied Dutchman, as the field attendant had said. A fellow of perhaps fifty-five, with sparse gray hair and a heavy-jowled, smooth-shaved face from which his small eyes peered stolidly at me. He laid aside a huge, old-fashioned calabash pipe and offered a pudgy hand.

"Welcome, young man, to Nareda. Seldom do we see strangers."

The meal which he presently cooked and served me himself was lavishly done. He spoke good English, but slowly, heavily, with the guttural intonation of his race. He sat across the table from me, puffing his pipe while I ate.

"What brings you here, young lad? A week, you say?"

"Or more. I don't know. I'm looking for oil. There should be petroleum beneath these rocks."

For an hour I avoided his prying questions. His little eyes roved me, and I knew he was no fool, this Dutchman, for all his heavy, stolid look.

We remained in his kitchen. Save for its mud walls, its concave, dome-roof, it might have been a cookery of the Highlands. There was a table with its tube-light; the chairs; his electron stove; his orderly rows of pots and pans and dishes on a broad shelf.

I recall that it seemed to me a woman's hand must be here. But I saw no woman. No one, indeed, beside Spawn himself seemed to live here. He was reticent of



his own business, however much he wanted to pry into mine.

I had felt convinced that we were alone. But suddenly I realized it was not so. The kitchen adjoined an interior back-garden. I could see it through the opened door oval—a dim space of flowers; a little path to a pergola; an adobe fountain. It was a sort of Spanish patio out there, partially enclosed by the wings of the house. Moonlight was struggling into it. And, as I gazed idly, I thought I saw a figure lurking. Someone watching us.

Was it a boy, observing us from the shadowed moonlit garden? I thought so. A slight, half grown boy. I saw his figure—in short ragged trousers and a shirt-blouse—made visible in a patch of moonlight as he moved away and entered the dark opposite wing of the house.

I did not see the boy's figure again; and presently I suggested that I retire. Spawn had already shown me

my bedroom. It was in another wing of the house. It had a window facing the front; and a window and door back to this same patio. And a door to the house corridor.

"Sleep well, Meester Grant." My bag was here on the table under an electrolier. "Shall I call you?"

"Yes," I said. "Early."

He lingered a moment. I was opening my bag. I flung it wide under his gaze.

"Well, good night. I shall be very comfortable, thanks."

"Good night," he said.

He went out the patio door. I watched his figure cross the moonlit path and enter the kitchen. The noise of his pattering there sounded for a time. Then the light went out and the house and garden fell into silence.

I closed my doors. They sealed on the inside, and I fastened them securely. Then I fastened the transparent window panes. I did not undress, but lay on the bed in the dark. I was tired; I realized it now. But sleep would not come.

I am no believer in occultism, but there are premonitions which one cannot deny. It seemed now as I lay there in the dark that I had every reason to be perturbed, yet I could not think why. Perhaps it was because I had been lying to this innkeeper stoutly for an hour past, and whether he believed me or not for the life of me I could not now determine.

I sat up on the bed, presently, and adjusted the wires and diaphragms of the ether-wave mechanism. When in place it was all concealed under my shirt. As I switched it on, the electrodes against my flesh tingled a little. But it was absolutely soundless, and one gets used to the tingle. I decided to call Hanley.

The New York wave-sorter handled me promptly, but Hanley's office was dead.

As I sat there in the darkness, annoyed at this, a slight noise forced itself on me. A scratching—a tap—something outside my window.

Spawn, come back to peer in at me?

I slipped noiselessly from the bed. The sound had come from the window which faced the patio. The room, over by the bed, was wholly dark. The moonlight outside showed the patio window as a dimly illumined oval.

For a moment I crouched on the floor by the bed. No sound. The silence of the Lowlands is as heavy and oppressive as its air. I felt as though my heart were audible.

I lifted my foot; extracted my dirk. It opened into a very businesslike steel blade of a good twelve-inch length. I bared the blade. The click of it leaving the

flat, hollow handle sounded loud in the stillness of the room.

A moment. Then it seemed that outside my window a shadow had moved. I crept along the floor. Rose up suddenly at the window.

And stared at a face peering in at me. A small face, framed by short, clustering, dark curls.

A girl!

### **Chapter 3: In a Moonlit Garden**

She drew back from the window like a startled fawn; timorous, yet curious, too, for she ran only a few steps, then turned and stood peering. The moonlight slanted over the western roof of the building and fell on her. A slight, boyish figure in short, tattered trousers and a boy's shirt, open at her slim, rounded throat. The moonlight gleamed on the white shirt fabric to show it torn and ragged. Her arms were upraised; her head, with clustering, flying dark curls, was tilted as though listening for a sound from me. A shy, wild creature. Drawn to my window; tapping to awaken me, then frightened at what she had done.

I opened the garden door. She did not move. I thought she would run, but she did not. The moonlight was on me as I stood there. I was conscious of its etching me with its silver sheen. And twenty feet from me this girl stood and gazed, with startled eyes and parted lips—and white limbs trembling like a frightened animal.

The patio was very silent. The heavy arching fronds stirred slightly with a vague night breeze; the moonlight threw a lacy dark pattern of them on the gray stone path. The fountain bowl gleamed white in the moonlight behind the girl, and in the silence I could hear the low splashing of the water.

A magic moment. Unforgettable. It comes to some of us just once, but to all of us it comes. I stood with its spell upon me. Then I heard my voice, tense but softly raised.

"Who are you?"

It frightened her. She retreated until the fountain was between us. And as I took a step forward, she retreated further, noiseless, with her bare feet treading the smooth stones the path.

I ran and caught her at the doorway of the flowered pergola. She stood trembling as I seized her arms.

But the timorous smile remained, and her eyes, upraised to mine, glowed with misty starlight.

"Who are you?"

This time she answered me. "I am called Jetta."

It seemed that from her white forearm within my grasp a magic current swept from her to me and back again. We humans, for all our clamoring, boasting intellectuality, are no more than puppets in Nature's hands.

"Are you Spawn's daughter?"

"Yes."

"I saw you a while ago, when I was having my meal."

"Yes—I was watching you."

"I thought you were a boy."

"Yes. My father told me to keep away. I wanted to meet you, so I came to wake you up."



"He may be watching us now."

"No. He is sleeping. Listen—you can hear him snore."

I could, indeed. The silence of the garden was broken now by a distant, choking snore.

We both laughed. She sat on the little mossy seat in the pergola doorway And on the side away from the snore. (I had the wit to be sure of that.)

"I wanted to meet you," she repeated. "Was it too bold?"

I think that what we said sitting there with the slanting moonlight on us, could not have amounted to much. Yet for us, it was so important! Vital. Building memories which I knew—and I think that she knew, even then—we would never forget.

"I will be here a week, Jetta."

"I want—I want very much to know you. I want you to tell me about the world of the Highlands. I have a few books. I can't read very well, but I can look at the pictures."

"Oh, I see—"

"A traveler gave them to me. I've got them hidden. But he was an old man: all men seem to be old—except those in the pictures, and you, Philip."

I laughed. "Well, that's too bad. I'm mighty glad I'm young."

Ah, in that moment, with blessed youth surging in my veins, I was glad indeed!

"Young. I don't remember ever seeing anyone like you. The man I am to marry is not like you. He is old, like father—"

I drew back from her, startled.

"Marry?"

"Yes. When I am seventeen. The law of Nareda—your Highland law, too, father says—will not let a girl be married until she is that age. In a month I am seventeen."

"Oh!" And I stammered, "But why are you going to marry?"

"Because father tells me to. And then I shall have fine clothes: it is promised me. And go to live in the Highlands, perhaps. And see things; and be a woman, not a ragged boy forbidden to show myself; and—"

I was barely touching her. It seemed as though something—some vision of happiness which had been given me—were fading, were being snatched away. I was conscious of my hand moving to touch hers.

"Why do you marry—unless you're in love? Are you?"

Her gaze like a child came up to meet mine. "I never thought much about that. I have tried not to. It frightened me—until to-night."

She pushed me gently away. "Don't. Let's not talk of him. I'd rather not."

"But why are you dressed as a boy?"

I gazed at her slim but rounded figure in tattered boy's garb—but the woman's lines were unmistakable. And her face, with clustering curls. Gentle girlhood. A face of dark, wild beauty.

"My father hates women. He says they are all bad. It is a sin to wear woman's finery; or it breeds sin in women. Let's not talk of that. Philip, tell me—oh, if you could only realize all the things I want to know. In Great New York, there are theatres and music?"

"Yes," I said. And began telling her about them.

The witching of this moonlit garden! But the moon had presently sunk, and to the east the stars were fading.

"Philip! Look! Why, it's dawn already. I've got to leave you."

I held her just a moment by the hand.

"May I meet you here to-morrow night?" I asked.

"Yes," she said simply.

"Good night—Jetta."

"Good night. You—you've made me very happy."

She was gone, into a doorway of the opposite wing. The silent, empty garden sounded with the distant, reassuring snores of the still sleeping Spawn.

I went back to my room and lay on my bed. And drifted off on a sea of magic memories. The world—my world before this night—now seemed to have been

so drab. Empty. Lifeless. But now there was pulsing,  
living magic in it for me.

I drifted into sleep, thinking of it.

## **Chapter 4: The Mine in the Cauldron Depths**

I was awakened by the tinkling, buzzing call of the radio-diaphragm beneath my shirt. I had left the call open.

It was Hanley. I lay down, eyeing my window which now was illumined by the flat light of dawn.

Hanley's microscopic voice:

"Phil? I've just raised President Markes, there in Nareda. I've been a bit worried about you."

"I'm all right, Chief."

"Well, you'd better see President Markes this morning."

"That was my intention."

"Tell him frankly what you're after. This smuggling of quicksilver from Nareda has got to stop. But take it easy, Phil; don't be reckless. Remember: one little knife thrust and I've lost a good man!"

I laughed at his anxious tone. That was always Hanley's way. A devil himself, when he was on a trail, but always worried for fear one of his men would come to harm.

"Right enough, Chief. I'll be careful."

He cut off presently.

I did not see Jetta that morning. I told Spawn I was hoping to see President Markes on my petroleum proposition. And at the proper hour I took myself to the government house.

This Lowland village by daylight seemed even more fantastic than shrouded in the shadows of night. The morning sun had dissipated the overhead mists. It was hot in the rocky streets under the weird overhanging vegetation. The settlement was quietly busy with its tropical activities. There were a few local shops; vehicles with the Highland domestic



animals—horses and oxen—panting in the heat; an occasional electro-automatic car.

But there were not many evidences of modernity here. The street and house tube-lights. A few radio image-finders on the house-tops. An automatic escalator bringing ore from a nearby mine past the government checkers to an aero stage for northern transportation. Cultivated fields in the village outskirts operated with modern machinery.

But beyond that, it seemed primitive. Two hundred years back. Street vendors. People in primitive, ragged, tropical garb. Half naked children. I was stared at curiously. An augmenting group of children followed me as I went down the street.

The President admitted me at once. In his airy office, with safeguards against eavesdropping, I found him at his desk with a bank of modern instruments before him.

"Sit down, Grant."

He was a heavy-set, flabby man of sixty-odd, this Lowland President. White hair; and an old-fashioned, rolling white mustache of the sort lately come into South American fashion. He sat with a glass of iced drink at his side. His uniform was stiffly white, and ornate with heavy gold braid, but his neckpiece was wilted with perspiration.

"Damnable heat, Grant."

"Yes, Sir President."

"Have a drink." He swung a tinkling glass before me. "Now then, tell me what is your trouble. Smuggling, here in Nareda. I don't believe it." His eyes, incongruously alert with all the rest of him so fat and lazy, twinkled at me. "We of the Nareda Government watch our quicksilver production very closely. The government fee is a third."

I might say that the Nareda government collected a third on all the mineral and agricultural products of

the country, in exchange for the necessary government concessions. Markes exported this share openly to the world markets, paying the duty exactly like a private corporation.

He added, "You think—Hanley thinks—the smuggling is on too large a scale to be any illicit producer?"

I nodded.

"Then," he said, "it must be one of our recognized mines."

"Hanley thinks it is a recognized mine, falsifying its production record," I explained.

"If that is so, I will discover it," he said. He spoke with enthusiasm and vigor. "For you I shall treat as what you are—the representative of our most friendly government. The figures of our quicksilver production I shall lay before you in just a few days. Let me fill up your glass, Grant."

The lazy tropics. I really did not doubt his sincerity. But I did doubt his ability to cope with any clever criminal. His enthusiasm for action would wilt like his neckpiece, in Nareda's heat. Unless, perhaps, the knowledge that the smuggler was cheating him as well as the United States—*that* might spur him.

He added—and now I got a shock wholly unexpected: "If we think that some recognized producer of quicksilver here is cheating us, it should not be difficult to check up on it. Nareda has only one large cinnabar lode being worked. A private individual: that fellow Jacob Spawn—"

"Spawn?" I exclaimed involuntarily.

"Why, yes. Did not he mention it? His mine is no more than ten kilometers from here—back on the southern slope."

"He didn't mention it," I said.

"So? That is strange; but he is a secretive Dutchman by nature. He specializes in prying into the other fellow's affairs. Hm-m."

He fell into a reverie while I stared at him. Spawn, the big—the only big—quicksilver producer here!

The President interrupted my startled thoughts. "I hope you did not intimate your real purpose?"

"No."

We both turned at the sound of an opening door. Markes called, "Ah, come in Perona! Are you alone? Good! Close that slide. Here is Chief Hanley's representative." He introduced us all in a breath. "This is interesting, Perona. Damnably interesting. We're being cheated, what? It looks that way. Sit down, Perona."

This was Greko Perona. Nareda's Minister of Internal Affairs. Spawn had mentioned him to me. A South

American. A man in his fifties. Thin and darkly saturnine, with iron-gray hair, carefully plastered to cover his half-bald head. He sat listening to the President's harangue, twirling the upturned waxen ends of his artificially black mustache. A wave of perfume enveloped him. A ladies' courtier, this Perona by the look of him. His white uniform was immaculate, carefully tailored and carefully worn to set off at its best his still trim and erect figure.

"Well," he said, when at last the President paused, "of a surety something must be done."

Perona seemed not excited, rather more carefully watchful, of his own words, and of me. His small dark eyes roved me.

"What is it you would plan to do about it, Señorito?"

An irony was in that Latin diminutive! He spread his pale hands. "Your United States officials perhaps exaggerate. I am very doubtful if we have smugglers here in Nareda."

"Unless it is Spawn," the President interjected.

Perona frowned slightly. But his suave manner remained. "Spawn? Why Spawn?"

"You need not take offense, Perona," Markes retorted. "We are discussing this before an envoy of the United States, sent here to consult with us. We have nothing to hide."

Markes turned to me. And his next words were like a bomb exploding at my feet.

"Perona *is* offended, Grant. But I promise you, his natural personal prejudice will not affect my investigation. Of course he is prejudiced, since he is to marry Spawn's daughter, the little Jetta."

I started involuntarily. This pomaded old dotard! This perfumed, ancient dandy!

For all the importance of my mission in Nareda my thoughts had been subconsciously more upon Jetta—far more—than upon smugglers of quicksilver. This palsied popinjay! This, the reality of the specter which had been between Jetta and me during all that magic time in the moonlit garden!

This suave old rake! Betrothed to that woodland pixie whose hand I had held and to whom I had sung love songs in the magic flower-scented moonlight only a few hours ago! And whom I had promised to meet there again to-night!

This, then, was my rival!

Nothing of importance transpired during the remainder of that interview. Markes reiterated his intention of making a complete governmental investigation at once. To which Perona suavely assented.



"*Por Dios Señorito*," he said to me, "we would not have your great government annoyed at Nareda. If there are smugglers, we will capture them of a certainty."

From the Government House, it now being almost time for the midday meal, I returned to Spawn's.

The rambling mud walls of the Inn stood baking in the noonday heat when I arrived. The outer garden drowsed; there seemed no one about. I went through the main door oval into the front public room, where first I had met Spawn. He was not here now, nor was Jetta.

A sudden furtiveness fell upon me. With noiseless steps I went the length of the dim, padded interior corridor to my own room. My belongings seemed undisturbed; a vague idea that Spawn might have seized this opportunity to ransack them had come to me. But it seemed not; though if he had he would have found nothing.

I stood for a moment listening at my patio window. I could see the kitchen from here; there was no one in it. I started back for the living room. That furtive instinct was still on me. I made no noise. And abruptly I heard Spawn's voice, floating out softly in the hushed silence of the house.

"So, Perona?"

A brief silence, in which it seemed that I could hear a tiny aerial answer. Then Spawn again. A startled oath.

"De duvel! You say—"

I stood frozen, listening.

"She is here.... Yes, I will keep her close. I am no fool, Perona."

Spawn's laugh was like a growl. "Later to-day, yes. Fear not! I am no fool. I will be careful of it."

Spawn, talking by private audiphone, to Perona. The colloquy came to an abrupt end.

"... Might eavesdrop? By hell, you are right!"

I heard the click as Spawn and Perona broke connection. Spawn came from his room. But he was not quick enough. I slipped away before he saw me. In the living room I had time to be calmly seated with a lighted cigarette. His approaching heavy footsteps sounded. He came in.

"Oh—Grant."

"Good noon, friend Spawn. I'm hungry." I grinned at him. "I understand my bargain with you included a noonday meal. Does it?"

He eyed me suspiciously. "Have you been waiting here long?"

"No. I just came in."

He led me to the kitchen. He apologized for the informality of his hotel service: visitors were so infrequent. But the good quality of his food would make up for it.

"Right," I agreed. "Your food is marvelous, friend Spawn."

There was a difference in Spawn's manner toward me now. He seemed far more wary. Outwardly he was in a high good humor. He asked nothing concerning my morning at the Government House. He puttered over his electron-stove, making me help him; he cursed the heat; he said one could not eat in such heat as this; but the meal he cooked, and the way he sat down opposite me and attacked it, belied him.

He was acting; but so was I. And perhaps I deceived him as little as he deceived me. We avoided the things which were uppermost in the thoughts of us both. But, when we had very nearly finished the meal, I

decided to try him out. I said suddenly, out of a silence:

"Spawn, why didn't you tell me you were a producer of quicksilver?" I shot him a sharp glance. "You are, aren't you?"

It took him by surprise, but he recovered himself instantly. "Yes. Are you interested?"

I tried another shot. "What surprised me was that a wealthy mine owner—you are, aren't you?—should bother to keep an unprofitable hotel. Why bother with it, Spawn?"

I thought I knew the answer: he wanted Nareda's visitors under his eyes.

"That is a pleasure." There was irony in his tone. "I am a lonesome man. I like—interesting companionship, such as yours, young Grant."

It was on my tongue to hint at his daughter. But I thought better of it.

"I am going to the mine now," he said abruptly.  
"Would you like to come?"

"Yes," I smiled. "Thanks."

I wanted to see his mine. But that he should be eager to show it, surprised me. I wondered what purpose he could have in that. I had a hint of it later; for when we took his little autocar and slid up the winding road into the bloated crags towering on the slope behind Nareda, he told me calmly:

"I shall have to put you in charge of my mine commander. I am busy elsewhere this afternoon. You will see the mine just as well without me."

He added. "I must go to the Government House: President Markes wants a report on my recent production."

So that was what Perona had told him over the audiphone just before our noonday meal?

It was an inferno of shadows and glaring lights, this underground cavern. As modern mining activities go, it was small and primitive. No more than a dozen men were here, beside the sweating pudgy mine commander who was my guide. A voluble fellow; of what original nationality I could not determine.

We stood watching the line of carts dumping the ore onto the endless lifting-belt. It went a hundred feet or so up and out of the cavern's ascending shaft, to fall with a clatter into the bins above the smelter.

"Rich ore," I said. "Isn't it?"

The cinnabar ran like thick blood-red veins in the rock.

"Rich," said the mine commander. "That it is. Rich. But who does it make rich? Only Spawn, not me." He waved his arms, airing his grievance with which for an hour past he had regaled me. "Only Spawn. For me, a dole each week."

The smelter was in a stone building—one of a small group of mine houses which stood in a cauldron depression above excavations. Rounded domes of rock towered above them. The sun, even at this tri-noon hour, was gone behind the heights above us. The murky shadows of night were gathering, the mists of the Lowlands settling. The tube-lights of the mine, strung between small metal poles, winked on like bleary eyes.

"Of a day soon I will fling this job to hell—"

I was paying scant attention to the fellow's tirade. Could there be smuggling going on from this mine? It all seemed to be conducted openly enough. If the production record were being falsified I felt that this dissatisfied mine commander was not aware of it. He showed me the smelter, where the quicksilver condensed in the coils and ran with its small luminous silver streams into the vats.



He was called away momentarily by one of his men, leaving me standing there. I was alone; no one seemed in sight, or within hearing. In the shadow of the condensers I drew out my transmitter and called Hanley.

I got him within a minute.

"Chief!"

"Yes, Phil. I hoped you'd call me. Didn't want to chance it, raising you when you might not be alone."

I told him swiftly what I had done; where I was now.

And Hanley said, with equal briskness: "I've an important fact. Just had Markes on secret wavelength. He tells me that Spawn has been saving up his quicksilver for six months past. He's got several hundred thousand dollar-standards' worth of it in ingots there right now."

"Here at the mine?"

"Yes. Got them all radiuminized, ready for the highest priced markets. Markes says he is scheduled to turn them over to the government checkers to-morrow. The Nareda government takes its share to-morrow; then Spawn exports the rest."

I heard a footstep. "Off, Chief! I'll call you later!"

I clicked off summarily. The little grid was under my shirt when the mine commander rejoined me.

For another half hour or so I hovered about the smelter house. A treasure of quicksilver ingots here? I mentioned it casually to my companion. He shot me a sharp glance.

"Spawn has told you that?"

"I heard it."

"His business. We do not talk of that. Never can I tell what Spawn will choose to take offense at."

We rambled upon other subjects. Later, he said, "We work not at night. But Spawn, he is here often at night, with his friend, the Señor Perona."

That caught my attention. "I met Perona this morning," I said quickly. "Is he a partner of Spawn's?"

"If he is so, I never was told it. But much he is here—at night."

"Why at night?"

The fellow really knew nothing. Or if he did, he was diplomatic enough not to jeopardize his post by babbling of it to me. He said:

"Perona is Spawn's friend. Why not? His daughter to marry: that will make him a son-in-law." He laughed. "An old fool, but not such a fool either. Spawn is rich."

"His daughter. Has he a daughter?"

"The little Jetta. You haven't seen her? Well, that is not strange. Spawn keeps her very hidden. A mystery

about it: all Nareda talks, but no one knows; and Spawn does not like questions."

Spawn abruptly joined us! He came from the black shadows of the lurid smelter room. Had he heard us discussing Jetta? I wondered.

## **Chapter 5: Mysterious Meeting**

"Ah, Grant—have you enjoyed yourself?" He dismissed his subordinate. "I was detained. Sorry."

He was smoothly imperturbable. "Have you seen everything? Quite a little plant I have here? We shut down early to-day. I will make ready to close."

I followed him about while he arranged for the termination of the day's activities. The clatter of the smelter house was presently still; the men departing. Spawn and I were the last to leave, save for the eight men who were the mine's night guards. They were stalwart, silent fellows, armed with electronic needle projectors.

The lights of the mine went low until they were mere pencil points of blue illumination in the gloom. The eery look of the place was intensified by the darkness and silence of the abnormally early nightfall. The fantastic crags stood dark with formless shadow.

Spawn stopped to speak to one of the guards. The men wore a gold-trimmed, but now dirty, white linen uniform, wilted by the heat—the uniform of Nareda's police. I remarked it to him.

"The government lent me the men," Spawn explained. "Of an ordinary time I have only one guard."

"But this then, is not an ordinary time?" I hinted.

He looked at me sharply. And upon sudden impulse, I added:

"President Markes said something about you having a treasure here. Radiumized quicksilver."

It was evidently Spawn's desire to appear thoroughly frank with me. He laughed. "Well, then, if Markes has told you, then might I not as well admit it? The treasure is here, indeed yes. Will you like to see it?"

He led me into a little strong room adjoining the smelter coil-rectifiers. He flashed his hand searchlight. On the floor, piled crosswise, were small moulded bars of refined quicksilver—dull, darkened silver ingots of this world's most precious metal.

"Quite a treasure, Grant, here to-night. See, it is radiumized."

He snapped off his torch. In the darkness the little bars glowed irridescent.

"To-morrow I will divide with our Nareda government. One-third for them. And my own share I will export: to Great New York, this shipment. Already I have the order for it."

He added calmly, "The duty is high, Grant. Too bad your big New York market is protected by so large a duty. With my cost of production—these accursed Lowland workmen who demand so much for their labor, and a third of all I produce taken by Nareda—there is not much in it for me."

He had re-lighted the room. I could feel his eyes on me, but I said nothing. It was obvious to me now that he knew I was a government customs agent.

I said, "This certainly interests me, friend Spawn. I'll tell you why some other time."

We exchanged significant glances, both of us smiling.

"Well can I guess it, young Grant. So here is my treasure. Without the duty I would soon be wealthy. Chut! Why should I roll in a pity for myself? There is a duty and I am an honest man, so I pay it."

I said, "Aren't you afraid to leave this stored here?" I knew that this pile of ingots—the quicksilver in its radiumized form—was worth four or five hundred thousand dollars in American gold-coin at the very least.

Spawn shrugged. "Who would attack it? But of course I will be glad to be rid of it. It is a great responsibility



—even though it carries international insurance, to protect my and the Nareda Government share."

He was sealing up the heavy barred portals of the little strong-room. There was an alarm-detector, connected with the office of Nareda's police commander. Spawn set the alarm carefully.

"I have every safeguard, Grant. There is really no danger." He added, as though with sudden thought. "Except possibly one—a depth bandit named De Boer. Ever you have heard of him?"

"Yes. I have."

We climbed into Spawn's small automatic vehicle. The lights of the mine faded behind us as we coasted the winding road down to the village.

"De Boer," said Spawn. "A fellow who lives by his wits in the depths. Near here, perhaps: who knows? They say he has many followers—fifty—a hundred, perhaps—outlaws: a cut-belly band it must be."

"Didn't he once take a hand in Nareda's politics?" I suggested.

Spawn guffawed. "That is so. He was once what they called a patriot here. He thought he might be made President. But Markes ran him out. Now he is a bandit. I have believe that American mail-ship which sank last year in the cauldron north of the Nares Sea—you remember how it was attacked by bandits?—I have always believe that was De Boer's band."

We rolled back to Nareda. Spawn's manner had again changed. He seemed even more friendly than before. More at his ease with me. We had supper, and smoked together in his living room for half an hour afterward. But my thoughts were more on Jetta than on her father. There was still no evidence of her about the premises. Ah, if I only had known what had taken place there at Spawn's that afternoon while I was at the mine!

Soon after supper Spawn yawned. "I think I shall go to bed." His glance was inquiring. "What are you going to do?"

I stood up. "I'll go to bed, too. Markes wants to see me early in the morning. You'll be there, Spawn?"

"Yes. We will go together."

It was still no more than eight o'clock in the evening. Spawn followed me to my bedroom, and left me at its door.

"Sleep well. I will call you in time."

"Thanks, Spawn."

I wondered if there were irony in his voice as he said good night. No one could have told.

I did not go to bed. I sat listening to the silence of my room and the garden, and Spawn's retreating

footsteps. He had said he was sleepy, but nevertheless I presently heard him across the patio. He was apparently in the kitchen, cleaning away our meal, to judge by the rattling of his pans. It was as yet not much after hour eight of the evening. The hours before my tryst with Jetta seemed an interminable time to wait. She might not come, though, I was afraid, until midnight.

At all events I felt that I had some hours yet. And it occurred to me that the evening was not yet too far advanced for me to call upon Perona. He lived not far from here, I had learned. I wanted to see this beribboned old Minister of Nareda's Internal Affairs.

I would use as my excuse a desire to discuss further the possibility of smuggler being here in Nareda.

I put on my hat and a light jacket, verified that my dirk was readily accessible and sealed up my room. Spawn apparently was still in the kitchen. I got out of the house, I felt sure, without him being aware of it.

The Nareda streets were quiet. There was a few pedestrians, and none of them paid much attention to me. It was no more than ten minutes walk to Perona's home.

His house was set back from the road, surrounded by luxurious vegetation. There was a gate in front of the garden, and another, a hundred feet or so along a small alleyway which bordered the ground to my left. I was about to enter the front gate when sight of a figure passing under the garden foliage checked me. It was a man, evidently coming from the house and headed toward the side gate. He went through a shaft of light that slanted from one of the lower windows of the house.

Perona! I was sure it was he. His slight figure, with a gay, tri-cornered hat. A short tasseled cloak hanging from his shoulders. He was alone; walking fast. He evidently had not seen me. I crouched outside the high front wall, and through its lattice bars I saw him reach the side gate, open it swiftly, pass through, and close it after him. There was something furtive about

his manner, for all he was undisguised. I decided to follow him.

The front street fortunately was deserted at the moment. I waited long enough for him to appear. But he did not; and when I ran to the alley corner—chancing bumping squarely into him—I saw him far down its dim, narrow length where it opened into the back street which bordered his grounds to the rear. He turned to the left and shot a swift glance up the alley, which I anticipated, provided for by drawing back. When I looked again, he was gone.

I have had some experience at playing the shadow. But it was not easy here along the almost deserted and fairly bright Nareda streets. Perona was walking swiftly down the slope toward the outskirts of the village where it bordered upon the Nares Sea. For a time I thought he was headed for the landing field, but at a cross-path he turned sharply to the right, away from the field, whose sheen of lights I could now see down the rocky defile ahead of me. There was nothing but broken, precipitous rocky country ahead of him, into which this path he had taken was

winding. What could Perona, a Minister, be engaged in, wandering off alone into this black, deserted region?

It was black indeed, by now. The village was soon far behind us. A storm was in the night air; a wind off the sea; solid black clouds overhead blotted out the moon and stars. The crags and buttes and gullies of this tumbled area loomed barely visible about me. There were times when only my feel of the path under my feet kept me from straying, to fall into a ravine or crevice.

I prowled perhaps two hundred yards behind Perona. He was using a tiny hand-flash now; it bobbed and winked in the darkness ahead, vanishing sometimes when a curve in the path hid him, or when he plunged down into a gully and up again. I had no search-beam. Nor would I have dared use one: Perona could too obviously have seen that someone was following him.

There was half a mile of this, I think, though it seemed interminable. I could hear the sea, rising with the wind, pounding against the rocks to my left. Then,

a distance ahead, I saw lights moving. Perona's—and others. Three or four of them. Their combined glow made a radiance which illumined the path and rocks. I could see the figures of several men whom Perona had joined. They stood a moment and then moved off. To the right a ragged cliff wall towered the path. The spots of light bobbed toward it. I caught the vague outline of a huge broken opening, like a cave mouth in the cliff. The lights were swallowed by it.

I crept cautiously forward.



## **Chapter 6: Ether-wave Eavesdropping**

I had thought it was a cavern mouth into which the men had disappeared, but it was not. I reached it without any encounter. It loomed above me, a great archway in the cliff—an opening fifty feet high and equally as broad. And behind it was a roofless cave—a sort of irregularly circular bowl, five hundred feet across its broken, boulder-strewn, caked-ooze floor.

I crouched in the blackness under the archway. The moon had risen and its light filtered with occasional shafts through the swift-flying black clouds overhead. The scene was brighter. It was dark in the archway, but a glow of moonlight in the bowl beyond showed me its tumbled floor and the precipitous, eroded walls, like a crater-rim, which encircled it.

The men whom Perona had met were across the bowl near its opposite side. I could see the group of them, five hundred feet from me, by a little moonlight that was on them; also by the sheen from the spots of their hand-lights. Four or five men, and Perona. I thought I distinguished the aged Minister sitting on a rock, and

before him a huge giant man's figure striding up and down. Perona seemed talking vehemently: the men were listening; the giant paused occasionally in his pacing to fling a question.

All this I saw with my first swift glance. My attention was drawn from the men to an object near them. The nose of a flyer showed between two upstanding crags on the floor of the valley. Only its forward horizontal propellers and the tip of its cabin and landing gear were visible, but I could guess that it was a fair-sized ship.

The men were too far away for me to hear them. Could I get across the floor of the bowl without discovery? It did not seem so. The accursed moonlight became stronger every moment. Then I saw a guard—a dark figure of a man showing just inside the archway, some seventy feet from me. He was leaning against a rock, facing my way. In his hands was a thick-barreled electronic projector.

I could not advance: that was obvious. The moonlight lay in a clear clean patch beyond the archway. The guard stood at its edge.

A minute or two had passed. Perona was still talking vehemently. I was losing it: not a word was audible. Yet I felt that if I could hear Perona now, much that Hanley and I wanted to learn would be made clear to us. My little microphone receiver could be adjusted for audible air vibrations. I crouched and held it cautiously above my head with its face, like a listening ear, turned toward the distant men. My single-vacuum amplification brought up the sound until their voices sounded like whispers murmured in my ear-grids.

"De Boer, listen to me—"

Perona's voice. They must have been chance words spoken loudly. It was all I could hear, save tantalizing, unintelligible murmurs.

So this was De Boer, the bandit! The big fellow pacing before Perona. I wanted infinitely more, now, to hear what was being said.

I thought of Hanley. There might be a way of handling this.

I had to murmur very softly. I was hidden in these shadows from the guard's sight, but he was close enough to hear my normal voice. I chanced it. A wind was sucking through the archway with an audible whine: the guard might not hear me.

"X. 2. AY."

The sorter's desk. He came in. I murmured Hanley's rating. "Rush. Danger. Special."

It went swiftly through. Hanley, thank Heaven, was at his desk.

I plugged in my little image finder; held it over my head; turned it slowly. I whispered:

"Look around, Chief. See where I am? Near Nareda; couple of miles out. Followed Perona; he met these men.

"The big one is De Boer, the depth bandit. I can't hear what they're saying—but I can send you their voice murmurs."

"Amplify them all you can. Relay them up," Hanley ordered.

I caught Perona's murmurs again; I swung them through my tiny transformers and off my transmitter points into the ether.

"Hear them, Chief?"

"Yes. I'll try further amplification."

It was what I had intended. Hanley's greater power might be able to amplify those murmurs into audible strength.

"I'm getting them, Phil."

He swung them back to me. Grotesquely distorted, blurred with tube-hum and interference crackle, they roared in my ear-grids so loudly that I saw the nearby guard turn his head as though startled. Listening....

But evidently he concluded it was nothing.

I cut down the volume. Hanley switched in.

"By God. Phil! This—"

"Off, Chief! Let me hear, too!"

He cut away. Those distorted voices! They came from Perona and the bandits to me across this five hundred foot moonlit bowl; from me, thirteen hundred miles

up to Hanley's instruments; and back to me once more. But the words, most of them, now were distinguishable.

Perona's voice: "I tell it to you. De Boer ... and a good chance for you to make the money."

"But will they pay?"

"Of course they will pay. Big. A ransom princely."

"And why, Perona? Why princely? Who is this fellow—so important?"

"He is with rich business men, I tell to you."

"A private citizen?"

"... And a private citizen, of a surety. Fool! Have you come to be a coward, De Boer?"

"Pah!"

"Well then I tell you it is a lifetime chance. All of it I have arranged. If he was a government agent, that

would be very different, for they are very keen, this administration of the American government, to protect their agents. But their private citizens—it is a scandal! Do you not ever pick the newscasters' reports, De Boer? Has it not been a scandal that this administration does very little for its citizens abroad?"

"And you want to get rid of this fellow? Why, Perona?"

"That is not your concern. The ransom is to be all yours. Make away with him—in the depths somewhere. Demand your ransom. Fifty thousand gold-standards! Demand it of me. Of Nareda!"

"And you will pay it?"

"I promise it. Nareda will pay it—and Nareda will collect the ransom from the American capitalists. Very easy."

His voice fell lower. "Between us, you will get the ransom money from Nareda—and then kill your prisoner if you like. Call it an accident; what matter?



And dead men are silent men, De Boer. I will see that no real pursuit is made after you."

They were talking about me! It was obvious. Questions rushed at me. Perona, planning with this bandit to abduct me. Hold me for ransom. Or kill me! But Perona knew that I was not a private citizen. He was lying to De Boer, to persuade him.

Why this attack upon me? Was Spawn in on it? Why were they so anxious to get rid of me? Because of Jetta? Or because I was dangerous, prying into their smuggling activities. Or both?

De Boer: "... Get up with my men through the streets to Spawn's house? You have it fixed?"

"Yes. Over the route from here as I told you, there are no police to-night. I have ordered them off. In the garden. *Dios!* You offer so many objections! I tell you all is fixed. In an hour, half an hour; even now, perhaps, the Americano is in the garden. The girl has

promised to meet him there. He will be there, fear not. Will you go?"

"Yes."

"Hah! That is the De Boer I have always admired!"

I could see them in the moonlight across the pit. Perona now standing up, the giant figure of the bandit towering over him.

Hanley's microscopic voice cut in: "Getting it, Phil? To seize you for ransom!"

"Yes. I hear it."

"This girl. Who—?"

"Wait, Chief. Off—"

De Boer: "I will do it! Fifty thousand."

Perona: "An hour now. Spawn will be at his home asleep."

"And you will go to the mine?"

"Yes. Now, from here. You seize this fellow Grant, and then attack the mine. Our regular plan, De Boer. This does not change it."

Attack Spawn's mine! Half a million of treasure was there to-night!

Perona was chuckling: "You give Spawn's guards the signal. They are all my men—in my pay. They will run away when you appear."

Hanley cut in again. "By the gods, they're after that treasure! Phil, listen to me! you must...." His voice faded.

"Chief, I can't hear you!"

Hanley came again: "... And I will notify Porto Rico. The local patrol will be about ready to leave."

"Or notify Nareda headquarters," I suggested. "If you can get President Markes, he can send some police to the mine—"

"And find all Nareda's police bribed by Perona? I'll get Porto Rico. We have an hour or two; the patrol can reach you in an hour."

The bandits were preparing to leave here. Two or three of them had gone to the flyer. Perona and De Boer were parting.

"... Well, that is all, De Boer."

"Right, Señor Perona. I will start shortly."

"On foot, by the street route to Spawn's—"

Hanley's hurried voice came back: "I've sent the call to Porto Rico."

The guard had moved again. He was no more than forty feet away from me now—standing up gazing directly toward where I was crouching over my tiny instruments in the shadows of the rocky arch. A footstep sounded behind me, on the path outside the arch. Someone approaching!

A tiny light bobbing!

Then a voice calling, "Perona! De Boer!"

The guard took a step forward; stopped, with levelled weapon.

Then the voice again: it was so loud it went through my opened relay, flashed up to New York, and blew out half a dozen of Hanley's attuned vacuums.

"Perona!"

Spawn's voice! He was coming toward me! I lay prone, my little grids switched off. I held my breath.

Spawn's figure went past within ten feet of me. But he did not see me.

He met the guard. "Hello, Gutierrez. The damned American—"

Perona and De Boer came hastening. Spawn joined them in the moonlight just beyond the archway, close enough for me to hear them plainly. Spawn was out of breath, panting from his swift walk. He greeted them with a roar.

"The American—he is gone!"

"*Dios!* Gone where, Spawn?"

"The hell—how do I know, Perona? He is gone from his room—from the house. Maybe he followed you here? Did he?"

## **Chapter 7: Behind the Sealed Door**

There was a moment when I think I might have escaped unseen from that archway. But I was too amazed at Spawn's appearance to think of my own situation. I had believed that Perona was plotting against Spawn, meeting these bandits in this secret place; I had just heard them planning to attack Spawn's mine—to rob it of the treasure doubtless, which I knew was stored there.

But I realized now it was not a plot against Spawn. He had come here swiftly to join Perona and tell him that I, their intended victim, was missing. He had greeted the bandit guard by name. He seemed, indeed, as well known to these bandits as Perona himself.

They stood now in a group some thirty feet away from me. I could hear their excited voices perfectly clearly. My instruments were off; but I recall that as I listened to Spawn I was also aware of the tingle of the electrode-band on my chest—Hanley, vigorously calling me back to find out why I had so summarily disconnected.

"I took him to his room," Spawn was explaining excitedly. "De duvel, why should I have sealed him in? How could I? He is no child!"

De Boer laughed caustically. "And so he has walked away from you? I think I am a fool to mix myself with you two."

Perona retorted, "I have made you rich, De Boer. Think what you like; to-night is the end of our partnership. Only, you do what I have told you to-night."

"Hah! How can I? Your American has flown his trap."

This guard—this Gutierrez, as Spawn had called him—was listening with interest. De Boer's several other men were gathered there. I felt myself safe where I was, for the moment at least.

I cut Hanley in. "Chief, they're closer! Spawn has come! They've missed me! I'll relay what they're



saying, but you step it down; there's too much volume."

"You're all right, Phil? Thank Heaven for that! Something blew my vacuums."

"Chief, listen—here they are—"

Perona: "But he will be back. In the garden now, no doubt, with Jetta."

De Boer: "Ah—the little Jetta! So she is there, Spawn? Not in years have you spoken of your daughter. A young lady now, I suppose. Is it so?"

Spawn cursed. "We leave her out of this. You follow the Señor's plan."

"Come to your house? You think the bird will be there for me to seize?"

"Yes," Perona put in. "You go there; in an hour. Then to the mine."

Spawn undoubtedly was in this plot to attack his mine! He said, "At the mine we have arranged everything. Damn this American! But for Perona I would not bother with him."

"But you will bother," Perona interjected.

De Boer laughed again. "I would be witless could I not figure this! He is a young man, and so handsome he has frightened you with the little Jetta! Is that it, Perona? Jealous, eh?"

I had been holding the image finder so that Hanley might see them. Hanley's voice rattled my ear-grid. "Phil! Get away from there! Look! De Boer is searching!"

De Boer had, a moment before, spoken quietly aside to Gutierrez. And now three or four of the men were spreading out, poking about with small hand-flashes. Searching for me! The possibility that I might be here, eavesdropping!

Hanley repeated vehemently, "Phil, they'll find you! Get out of there: the way is still open!"

Gutierrez was approaching the archway. But I lingered a moment longer.

"Chief, you heard about that girl, Jetta, Spawn's daughter—"

I stopped. Perona was saying, "Spawn, was Jetta still in her room? You did not untie her?"

"No."

"And gagged? Suppose the Americano was back there now? She might call to him, and he would release her —"

De Boer: "How do you know he is not around here? Listening?"

With the assumption that I might be within hearing, De Boer tried to trap me. Gutierrez, at a signal now, suddenly dashed through the archway and planted

himself on the path outside. The other searchers spread their rays; the rocks all about me were lighted. But my niche was still untouched.

De Boer: "If he is around here—"

Perona: "He could not have followed me; I was too careful."

I was murmuring: "Chief, they've got that girl."

"Phil, you get away! Go to Markes. Stay with him."

"But Chief, that Jetta, I—"

"Keep out of this! You're only one; you can't help any! I've sent for the Porto Rican patrol ship to handle this."

"Chief, I'm going back to Spawn's."

"No—"

I cut off abruptly. In another moment I would have been discovered. The searchers were headed directly for me.

I moved, crouching, back along the inner wall of the archway. The moon was momentarily behind a cloud. It was black under the arch; and out front it was so dim I could only see the faint blob of Gutierrez's standing figure, and the spot of his flashlight.

Perona: "He is not around here, De Boer. That is foolish."

Spawn: "He could have gone anywhere. Maybe a walk around the village."

Perona: "Go back home, Spawn. De Boer will come—"

Their voices faded as I moved away. A searching bandit behind me poked with his light into the crevice where a moment before I had been crouching. I moved faster. Only Gutierrez now was in front of me.

He was at the far end of the arch. I could slip past, and still be fifty feet from him—if I could avoid his swinging little light-beam.

I was running now, chancing that he would hear me. I was on the path; I could see it vaguely.

From behind me came a sizzling flash, and the ting of the flying needle as it missed me by a foot.

"The Americano! He goes there!"

Another shot. The shouts of the bandits in the archway. A turmoil back there.

But it was all behind me. I leaped sideways off the path as Gutierrez's small light-beam swept it. I ran stumbling through a stubble of boulders, around an upstanding rock spire, back to the path again.

There were other shots. Then De Boer's voice, faint by distance: "Stop! Fools! We will alarm the village! The landing field can see our shots from here! Take it easy! You can't get him!"

The turmoil quieted. I went around a bend in the path, running swiftly.

Pursuit was behind me. I could hear them coming.

It was a run of no more than ten minutes to the junction where, down the slope, I could see the lights of the landing field.

The glow of the village was ahead of me. Then I was in its outskirts. Occasional dark houses. Deserted streets.

I slowed to a fast walk. I was breathless, panting in the heat.

I heard no pursuit now. But Spawn and the rest of them doubtless were after me. Would they head back for Spawn's inn? I thought they would. But I could beat them back there; I was sure there was no shorter route than this I was taking.

Would they use their flyer? That would not gain them any time, what with launching it and landing, for so short a flight. And a bandit flyer could not very well land unseen or unnoticed, even in somnolent Nareda.

I reached the main section of the village. There were occasional lights and pedestrians. My haste was noticeable, but I was not accosted. There seemed no police about. I recalled Perona's remark that he had attended to that.

My electrode was tingling. I had been running again. I slowed down.

"Chief?"

"Phil." His voice carried relief. "You got away?"

"Yes. I'm in the village."

"Go to President Markes."

"No, I'm headed for Spawn's! They're all behind me; I can get there a few minutes ahead of them."



I panted an exclamation, incoherently, but frankly, about Jetta. "I'm going to get her out of there."

"Phil, what in hell—"

I told him.

"So you've fallen in love with a girl? Entangled—"

"Chief!"

"Go after her, Phil! Got her bound and gagged, have they? Going to marry her to this Perona? Like the Middle Ages?"

I had never seen this side of Hanley.

"Get her if you want her. Get her out of there. Take her to Markes—No, I wouldn't trust anybody in Nareda! Take her into the uplands behind the village. But keep away from that mine! Have you got flash-fuses?"

"Yes."

I was within sight of Spawn's house. The street was dim and deserted. I was running again.

I panted. "I'm—almost at Spawn's!"

"Good! When it's over, whatever happens up there at the mine, then signal the patrol."

"Yes."

I reached Spawn's front gate. The house and front garden were dark.

"Use your fuses, Phil. What colors?"

"I have red and blue."

"I'll talk to the patrol ship again. Tell them to watch for you. Red and blue. Two short red flashes, a long blue."

"Right, Chief. I'm here at Spawn's, cutting off."

"Come back on when you can." His voice went anxious again. "I'll wait here."

"All right."

I cut silent. I ran through the front doorway of Spawn's inn. The living room was dim and empty. Which way was Jetta's room? I could only guess.

I had a few minutes, perhaps, before my pursuers would arrive.

I reached the inner, patio garden. The moon was well out from under the clouds now. The patio shimmered, a silent, deserted fairyland.

"Jetta!" I called it softly. Then louder. "Jetta!"

Spawn's house was fairly large and rambling. There were so many rooms. Jetta was gagged; how could she answer me? But I had no time to search for her.

"Jetta?"

And then came her voice. "Philip?"

"Jetta! Which way? Where are you?"

"Here! This way: in my room."

A window and a door near the pergola. "Jetta!"

"Yes. I am in here. They tied me up. Not so loud, Phil: father will hear you."

"He's gone out."

I reached her garden door. Turned its handle. Rattled the door. Shoved frantically with my shoulder!

The metal door was firmly sealed!

## Part 2

### WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

In the year 2020 the oceans have long since drained from the surface of the earth, leaving bared to sun and wind the one-time sea floor. Much of it is flat, caked ooze, cracked and hardened, with, here and there, small scum-covered lakes, bordered by slimy rocks. It is hot, down in the depth of the great Lowland areas, and it is chiefly adventurers and outcasts of human kind who can endure life in what few towns there are.

Into remote Lowlands, in an invisible flyer, go Grant and Jetta—prisoners of a scientific depth bandit.

Into Nareda, the capital village of the tiny Lowland Republic of Nareda, goes Philip Grant, an operative of the United States Customs Department, on a dangerous assignment—to ferret out the men who are smuggling mercury into the United States from that place.

Grant falls in love with Jetta, the daughter of Jacob Spawn, a big mercury mine owner of Nareda, only to learn that Spawn has promised her in marriage to Greko Perona, the country's Minister of Internal Affairs.

Grant follows Perona to a midnight Lowland rendezvous with mysterious strangers and eavesdrops on them, sending their indistinct voice murmurs to his chief, Hanley, in Washington, who relays them back to him, amplified. He learns several important things: that Spawn and Perona and a depth bandit named De Boer are together involved in the smuggling; that they have planned a fake robbery of a fortune in radiumized mercury stored at Spawn's mine, to collect the insurance on it and escape paying the Government export fee: and that they, plan to kidnap Grant for ransom.

The plotters learn of Grant's absence from Nareda, and suspect that he may be nearby. They start to search for him. Grant barely escapes, with the bandits and conspirators in hot pursuit. He flees to Jetta,

hoping that they will be able to get away together:  
but he finds her tied hand and foot in her room.

The door is tightly sealed.

And close behind him are his pursuers!

## **Chapter 8: Jetta's Defiance**

I must go back now to picture what befell Jetta that afternoon while I was at Spawn's mine. It is not my purpose to becloud this narrative with mystery. There was very little mystery about it to Jetta, and I can reconstruct her viewpoint of the events from what she afterward told me.

Jetta's room was in a wing of the house on the side near the pergola. Her window and door looked out upon the patio. When I had retired—that first night in Nareda—Spawn had gone to his daughter and upbraided her for showing herself while he was giving me that first midnight meal.

"You stay in your room: you have nothing to do with him. Hear me?"

"Yes, Father."

From her infancy he had dominated her; it never occurred to either of them that she could disobey. And



yet, this time she did; for no sooner was he asleep that night than she came to my window as I have told.

This next day Jetta dutifully had kept herself secluded. She cooked her own breakfast while I was at the Government House, and was again out of sight by noon.

Jetta was nearly always alone. I can picture her sitting there within the narrow walls of her little room. Boy's ragged garb. All possible femininity stripped from her. Yet, within her, the woman's instincts were struggling. She sewed a great deal, she since has told me, there in the cloistered dimness. Making little dresses of silk and bits of finery given her surreptitiously by the neighbor women. Gazing at herself in them with the aid of a tiny mirror. Hiding them away, never daring to wear them openly; until at intervals her father would raid the room, find them and burn them in the kitchen incinerator.

"Instincts of Satan! By damn but I will get these woman's instincts out of you, Jetta!"

A

nd there were hours when she would try to read hidden books, and look at pictures of the strange fairy world of the Highlands. She could read and write a little: she had gone for a few years to the small Nareda government school, and then been snatched from it by her father.

When Spawn and I had finished that noonday meal, I recall that he left me for a moment. He had gone to Jetta.

"I am taking that young American to the mine. I will return presently. Stay close, Jetta."

"Yes, Father."

He left with me. Jetta remained in her room, her thoughts upon the coming night. She trembled at them. She would meet me again, this evening in the moonlit garden....

The sound of a man walking the garden path aroused her from her reverie. Then came a soft ingratiating voice:

"Jetta, *chica Mia!*"

It was Perona, standing by the pergola preening his effeminate mustache.

"Jetta, little love bird, come out and talk to me."

Jetta slammed the window slide and sat quiet.

"Jetta, it is your Greko."

"Well do I know it," she muttered.

"Jetta!" He strode down the path and back. "Jetta."  
His voice began rising into a strident, peevish anger.

"Jetta, are you in there? *Chica*, answer me."

No answer.

"Jetta, *por Dios*—" He fumed, then fell to pleading.

"Are you in there? Please, little love bird, answer your Greko. Are you in there?"

"Yes."

"Come out then. Come to Greko."

S

he said sweetly. "My father does not want me to talk to men. You know that is so, Señor Perona."

It grounded him. "Why—"

"Is it not so?"

"Y-yes, but I am not—"

"A man?" Little imp! She relished impaling him upon the shafts of her ridicule. Her sport was interrupted by the arrival of Spawn. He had left me at the mine

and come directly back home. Jetta heard his heavy tread on the garden path, then his voice:

"Ah, Perona."

And Perona: "Jetta will not come out and talk to me." The waxen mustached Minister of Nareda's Internal Affairs was like a sulky child. But Spawn was unimpressed. Spawn said:

"Well, let her alone. We have more important things to engage us. I have the American occupied at the mine. You heard from De Boer?"

"I went last night. All is ready as we planned. But Spawn, this fool of an American, this Grant—"

"Hush! Not so loud, Perona!"

"I am telling you—!" Perona was excited. His voice rose shrilly, but Spawn checked him.

"Shut up: you waste time. Tell me exactly the arrangements with De Boer. *Le grand coup!* now; to-

night most important of nights—and you rant of your troubles with a girl!"

T

hey were standing by the pergola, quite near Jetta's shaded window. She crouched there, listening to them. None of this was entirely new to Jetta. She had always been aware more or less of her father's secret business activities. As a child she had not understood them. Nor did she now, with any clarity. Spawn, had always talked freely within her hearing, ignoring her, though occasionally he threatened her to keep her mouth shut.

She heard now fragments of this discussion between her father and Perona. They moved away from the pergola and sat by the fountain, speaking too low for her to hear. And then they paced the path, coming nearer, and she caught their voices again. And occasionally they grew excited, or vehement, and then their raised tones were plainly audible to her.

And this that she heard, with what she knew already, and with what subsequently transpired, enables me now to piece together the facts into a connected explanation.

In the establishment of his cinnabar mine some years before, Spawn was originally financed by Perona. The South American was then newly made Minister of Nareda's Internal Affairs. He became Spawn's business partner. They kept the connection secret. Spawn falsified his production records; and Perona with his governmental position was enabled to pass these false accounts of the mine's production. Nareda was systematically cheated of a portion of its legal share.

But this, after a time, did not satisfy the ambitious Perona and Spawn. They began to plan how they might engage in smuggling some of their quicksilver into the United States.

Perona, during these years, had had ambitions of his own in other directions. President Markes, of Nareda, was an honest official. He handicapped Perona

considerably. There were many ways by which Perona could have grown rich through a dishonest handling of the government affairs. It was done almost universally in all the small Latin governments. But Marques as President made it dangerous in Nareda. Even the duplicity with the mine was a precarious affair.

T

here was at this time in Nareda a young adventurer named De Boer. A handsome, swaggering fellow in his late twenties. He was a good talker; he spoke many languages; he could orate with fluency and skilful guile. His smile, his colorful personality, and his gift for oratory, made it easy for him to stir up dissatisfaction among the people.

De Boer became known as a patriot. A revolution in Nareda was brewing. Perona, as Nareda's Minister, was De Boer's political enemy. The Nareda Government ran De Boer out, ending the potential



revolution. But Perona and Spawn had always secretly been friends with De Boer. It would have been very handy to have this unscrupulous young scoundrel as President.

When De Boer was banished with some of his most loyal followers, he began a career of petty banditry in the Lowland's depths. Spawn and Perona kept in communication with him, and, by a method which was presently made startlingly clear to Jetta and me, De Boer smuggled the quicksilver for Perona and Spawn. It was this activity which had finally aroused my department and caused Hanley to send me to Nareda.

This however, was a dangerous, precarious occupation. De Boer did not seem to think so, or care. But Perona and Spawn, with their established positions in Nareda, were always fearful of exposure. Even without my coming, they had planned to disconnect from De Boer.

"And for more than that," as Jetta had one day heard Perona remark to her father. "I'll tell to you that this De Boer is not very straight with us, Spawn." De Boer

would, upon occasion, fail to make proper return for the smuggled product.

S

o now they had planned a last coup in which De Boer was to help, and then they would be done with him: the two of them, Spawn and Perona, would remain as honest citizens of Nareda, and De Boer had agreed to take himself away and pursue his banditry elsewhere.

It was a simple plan; it promised to yield a high stake quickly. A final fling at illicit activity; then virtuous reformation, with Perona marrying the little Jetta.

B

eneath the strong room at the mine, Perona and Spawn had secretly built a cleverly concealed little vault. De Boer, this night just before the midnight

hour, was to attack the mine. Spawn and Perona had bribed the police guards to submit to this attack. The guards did not know the details: they only knew that De Boer and his men would make a sham attack, careful to harm none of them—and then De Boer would withdraw. The guards would report that they had been driven away by a large force. And when the excitement was over, the ingots of radiumized quicksilver would have vanished!

De Boer, making away into distant Lowland fastnesses, would obviously be supposed to have taken the treasure. But Perona, hidden alone in the strong-room, would merely carry the ingots down into the secret vault, to be disposed of at some future date. The ingots were well insured, by an international company, against theft. The Nareda government would receive one-third of that insurance as recompense for the loss of its share. Perona and Spawn would get two-thirds—and have the treasure as well.

S

uch was the present plan, into which, all unknown to me, I had been plunged. And my presence complicated things considerably. So much so that Perona grew vehement, this afternoon in the garden, explaining why. His shrill voice carried clearly to Jetta, in spite of Spawn's efforts to shut him up.

"I tell to you that Americano agent will undo us."

"How?" demanded the calmer Spawn.

"Already he has made Markes suspicious."

"Chut! You can befool Markes, Perona. You have for years been doing it."

"This meddling fellow, he has met Jetta!"

"I do not believe it." There was a sudden grimness to Spawn's tone at the thought. "I do not believe it. Jetta would not dare."

"You should have seen him flush when Markes mentioned at the conference this morning that I am to marry Jetta. No one could miss it. He has met her—I tell it to you—and it must have been last night."

"So, you say?" Jetta could see her father's face, white with suppressed rage. "You think that? And it is that this Grant might be your rival, that worries you? Not our plans for to-night, which have real importance—but worrying over a girl."

"She would not talk to me. She would not come out. He has no doubt put wild ideas into her head. Spawn, you listen to me. I have always been more clever than you at scheming. Is it not so? You have always said it. I have a plan now, it fits our arrangements with De Boer, but it will rid us of this Americano. When all is done and I have married Jetta—"

Spawn interrupted impatiently. "You will marry Jetta, never fear. I have promised her to you."

And because, as Jetta well knew, Perona had made it part of his bargaining in financing Spawn. But this they did not now mention.

"To get rid of this Grant—well, that sounds meritorious. He is dangerous around here. To that I agree."

"And with Jetta—"

"Have done, Perona!" With sudden decision Spawn leaped to his feet. "I do not believe she would have dared talk to Grant. We'll have her out and ask her. If she has, by the gods—"

It fell upon Jetta before she had time to gather her wits. Spawn strode to her door, and found it fastened on the inside.

"Jetta, open at once!"

He thumped with his heavy fists. Confused and trembling she unsealed it, and he dragged her out into the sunlight of the garden.

"Now then, Jetta, you have heard some of what we have been saying, perhaps?"

"Father—"

"About this young American? This Grant?"

She stood cringing in his grasp. Spawn had never used physical violence with Jetta. But he was white with fury now.

"Father, you—you are hurting me."

Perona interposed. "Wait Spawn! Not so rough! Let me talk to her. Jetta, *chica mia*, your Greko is worried —"

"To the hell with that!" Spawn shouted. But he released the girl and she sank trembling to the little seat by the pergola.

Spawn stood over her. "Jetta, look at me! Did you meet—did you talk to Grant last night?"

She wanted to deny it. She clung to his angry gaze. But the habit of all her life of truthfulness with him prevailed.

"Y-yes," she admitted.



## **Chapter 9: Trapped**

"Spawn! Hold!"

There was an instant when it seemed that Spawn would strike the girl. The blood drained from his face, leaving his dark eyes blazing like torches. His hamlike fist went back, but Perona sprang for him and clutched him.

"Hold, Spawn: I will talk to her. Jetta, so you did—"

The torrent of emotion swept Spawn; weakened him so that instead of striking Jetta, he yielded to Perona's clutch and dropped his arm. For a moment he stood gazing at his daughter.

"Is it so? And all my efforts, going for nothing, just like your mother!" He no more than murmured it, and as Perona pushed him, he sank to the bench beside Jetta. But did not touch her, just sat staring. And she stared back, both of them aghast at the enormity of this, her first disobedience.

I never had opportunity to know Spawn, except for the few times which I have mentioned. Perhaps he was at heart a pathetic figure. I think, looking back on it now that Spawn is dead, that there was a pathos to him. Spawn had loved his wife, Jetta's mother. As a young man he had brought her to the Lowlands to seek his fortune. And when Jetta was an infant, his wife had left him. Run away, abandoning him and their child.

Perhaps Spawn was never mentally normal after that. He had reared Jetta with the belief that sin was inherent in all females. It obsessed him. Warped and twisted all his outlook as he brooded on it through the years. Woman's instincts; woman's love of pleasure, pretty clothes—all could lead only to sin.

And so he had kept Jetta secluded. He had fought what he seemed to see in her as she grew and flowered into girlhood, and denied her everything which he thought might make her like her mother.

Spawn met his death within a few hours of this afternoon I am describing. Perhaps he was no more

than a scheming scoundrel. We are instinctively lenient with our appraisal of the dead. I do not know.

"Jetta," Perona said to her accusingly, "that is true, then: you did talk with that miserable Americano last night? You sinful, lying girl."

The contrition within Jetta at disobeying her father faded before this attack.

"I am not sinful." The trembling left her and she sat up and faced the accusing Perona. "I did but talk to him. You speak lies when you say I am sinful."

"You hear, Spawn? Defiant: already changed from the little Jetta I—"

"Yes, I am changed. I do not love you, Señor Perona. I think I hate you." Her tears were very close, but she finished: "I—I won't marry you. I won't!"

It stung Spawn. He leaped to his feet. "So you talk like that! It has gone so far as this, has it? Get to your room! We will see what you will and what you won't!"

Again the crafty Perona was calmest of them all. He thrust himself in front of Spawn.

"Jetta, to-night you plan to see him again, no? To-night?—here?"

"No," she stammered.

"You lie!"

"No."

"You lie! Spawn look at her! Lying! She has planned to meet him to-night! That is all we want to know." He broke into a cackling chuckle. "That fits my new plan, Spawn. A tryst with Jetta, here in the garden."

"Get to your room," Spawn growled. He dragged her back, and Perona followed them.

"You lie there." Spawn flung her to her couch. "After this night's work is done, we'll see whether you will or you won't."

"She may not stay in here." Perona suggested.

"She will stay."

"You seal her in?"

"I will seal her in."

Perona's eyes roved the little bedroom. One window oval and a door, both overlooking the patio.

"But suppose she should get out? There is no way to seal that window properly from outside. A cord!"

A long stout silken tassel-cord had been draped by Jetta at the window curtain. Perona snatched it down.

"If her ankles and wrists were tied with this—"

"No!" burst out Jetta. And then a fear for me rushed over her. A realization, forgotten in the stress of this conflict with her father, now swept over her. They were planning harm to me.

"No, do not bind me."

A sudden caution came to her. She was making it worse for me. Already she had done me immense harm.

She said suddenly, "Do what you like with me. I was wrong. I have no interest in that American. It is you, Greko, I—I love."

Spawn did not heed her. Perona insisted, "I would tie her with care."

He helped Spawn rope her ankles, and then her wrists, crossed behind her.

"A little gag, Spawn? She might cry out: we want no interference to-night." He was ready with a large silken handkerchief. They thrust it into her mouth and tied it behind her neck.

"There," growled Spawn. "You will and you won't: we shall see about that. Lie still, Jetta. If I have need to come again to you—"

They left her. And this time she heard them less clearly. But there were fragments:

Perona: "I will meet him again. After dark, to-night. Yes, he expects me. For his money, Spawn, his pay in advance. This De Boer works not for nothing."

Spawn: "You will arrange about your police on the streets? He can get here to my house safely?"

"Oh yes, at the tri-evening hour, certainly before midnight, before the attack on the mine. You must stay here, Spawn. Pretend to be asleep: it will lure the fool Americano out in to the moonlight."

Jetta could piece it together fairly well. They would have De Boer come and abduct me. Not tell him I was a government agent, with the micro-safety alarm which they suspected I carried, but just tell De Boer that I was a rich American, who could be abducted and held for a big ransom.

Perona's voice rose with a fragment: "If he springs his alarm, here in the moonlight, you can be here, Spawn,

and pretend to try and rescue him. A radio-image of that flashed to Hanley's office will exonerate us of suspicion."

Perona would promise De Boer that the Nareda government would pay the ransom quickly, collecting it later from the United States.

Spawn said, "You think De Boer will believe that?"

"Why should he not? I am skilful at persuasion, no? Let him find out later that the United States Government trackers are after him!" Perona cackled at the thought of it. "What of that? Let him kill this Grant. All the better."

Spawn said abruptly: "The United States may catch De Boer. Have you thought of that, Perona? The fellow would not shield us, but would tell everything."

"And who will believe him? The wild tale of a trapped bandit! Against your word, Spawn? You, an honest and wealthy mine owner? And I—I, Greko Perona, Minister of Internal Affairs of the Sovereign Power of



Nareda! Who will dare to give me the lie because a bandit tells a wild tale with no real facts to prop it?"

"Those police guards at the mine to-night?"

"Admit that they took your bribes? You are witless, Spawn! Let them but admit it to me and of a surety I will fling them into imprisonment! Now listen with care, for the after noon is going...."

Their voices lowered, then faded, and Jetta was left alone and helpless. Spawn went back to the mine to meet me. We returned and had supper, Jetta could dimly hear us.

There was silence about the house during the mid-evening. I had slipped out and followed Perona to his meeting with De Boer. Then Spawn had discovered my absence and had rushed to join Perona and tell him.

But Jetta knew nothing of this. The hour of her tryst with me was approaching. In the darkness of her room as she lay bound and gagged on her couch, she

could see the fitful moonlight rising to illumine the window oval.

She squirmed at the cords holding her, but could not loosen them. They cut into her flesh; her limbs were numb.

The evening wore on. Would I come to the garden tryst?

Jetta could not break her bonds. But gradually she had mouthed the gag loose. Then she heard my hurried footsteps in the patio; then my tense voice.

And at her answer I was pounding on her door. But it had been stoutly sealed by Spawn. I flung my shoulder against it, raging, thumping. But the heavy metal panels would not yield; the seal held intact.

"Jetta!"

"Philip, run away! They want to catch you! De Boer, the bandit, is coming!"

"I know it!"

Fool that I was, to pause with talk! There was no time: I must get Jetta out of here. Break down this door.

But it would not yield. A gas torch would melt this outer seal. Was there a torch here at Spawn's? But I had no time to search for a torch! Or a bar with which to ram this door—

A panic seized me, with the fresh realization that any instant De Boer and his men would arrive. I beat with futile fists on the door, and Jetta from within, calling to me to get away before I was caught.

This accursed door between us!

And then—after no more than half a minute, doubtless—I thought of the window. My momentary panic left me. I dashed to the window oval. Sealed. But the shutter curtain, and the glassite pane behind it, were fragile.

"Jetta, are you near the window?"

"No. On the bed. They have tied me."

"Look out; I'm breaking through!"

There were loose rocks, as large as my head, set to mark the garden path. I seized one and hurled it. With a crash it went through the window and fell to the floor of the room. A jagged hole showed.

"All right, Jetta?"

"Yes! Yes, Philip."

I squirmed through the oval and dropped to the floor. My arms were cut from the jagged glassite, though I did not know it then. It was dim inside the room, but I could see the outline of the bed with her lying on it.

Her ankles and wrists were tied. I cut the cords with my knife.

She was gasping. "They're planning to capture you. Philip! You should not be here! Get away!"

"Yes. But I'm going to take you with me. Can you stand up?"

I set her on her feet in the center of the room. A shaft of moonlight was coming through the hole in the window.

"Philip! You're bleeding!"

"It is nothing. Cut myself on the glassite. Can you stand alone?"

"Yes."

But her legs, stiffened and numb from having been bound so many hours, bent under her. I caught her as she was falling.

"I'll be—all right in a minute. But Philip, if you stay here—"

"You're going with me!"

"Oh!"

I could carry her, if she could not run. But it would be slow; and it would be difficult to get her through the window. And on the street we would attract too much attention.

"Jetta, try to stand. Stamp your feet. I'll hold you."

I steadied her. Then I bent down, chafing her legs with my hands. Her arms had been limp, but the blood was in them now. She murmured with the tingling pain, and then bent over, frantically helping me rub the circulation back into her legs.

"Better?"

"Yes." She took a weak and trembling step.

"Wait. Let me rub them more, Jetta."

Precious minutes!

"I'll knock out the rest of the window with that rock!  
We'll run; we'll be out of here in a moment."

"Run where?"

"Away. Into hiding—out of all this. The United States patrol-ship is coming from Porto Rico. It will take us from here."

"Where?"

"Away. To Great New York, maybe. Away from all this; from that old fossil, Perona."

I was stooping beside her.

"I'm all right now, Philip."

I rose up, and suddenly found myself clasping her in my arms; her slight body in the boy's ragged garb pressed against me.

"Jetta, dear, do you trust me? Will you come?"

"Yes. Oh, yes—anywhere, Philip, with you."

For only a breathless instant I lingered, holding her.  
Then I cast her off and seized the rock from the floor.  
The jagged glassite fell away under my blows.

"Now, Jetta. I'll go first—"

But it was too late! I stopped, stricken by the sound of  
a voice outside!

"He's there! In the girl's room! That's her window!"

Cautious voices in the garden! The thud of  
approaching footsteps.

I shoved Jetta back and rushed to the broken window  
oval. The figures of De Boer and his men showed in  
the moonlight across the patio. They had heard me  
breaking the glassite. And they saw me, now.

"There he is, De Boer!"

We were trapped!



## **Chapter 10: The Murder in the Garden**

"Hans, keep back! I will go!"

"But Commander—"

"Armed? The hell he is not! Spawn said no. Spawn! Where is Spawn? He was here."

I had dropped back from the window, and, gripping Jetta, stood in the center of the room.

"Jetta, dear."

"Oh. Philip!"

"There's no other way out of here?"

"No! No!"

Only the heavy sealed door, and this broken window. The bandits in the garden had paused at sight of me. Someone had called.

"He may be armed, De Boer."

They had stopped their forward rush and darted into the shelter of the pergola. I might be armed!

We could hear their low voices not ten feet from us. But I was not armed, except for my knife. Futile weapon, indeed.

"Jetta, keep back. If they should fire—"

I got a look through the oval. De Boer was advancing upon it, with his barreled projector half levelled. He saw me again. He called:

"You American, come out!"

I crouched on the floor, pushing Jetta back to where the shadows of the bed hid her.

"You American!"

He was close outside the window. "Come out—or I am coming in!"

I said abruptly, "Come!"

My blade was in my hand. If he showed himself I could slash his throat, doubtless. But what about Jetta? My thoughts flashed upon the heels of my defiant invitation. Suppose, as De Boer climbed in the window, I killed him? I could not escape, and his infuriated fellows would rush us, firing through the oval, sweeping the room, killing us both. But Jetta now was in no danger. Her father was outside, and these bandits were her father's friends. I would have to yield.

I called, louder, "Why don't you come in?"

Could I hold them off? Frighten them off, for a time, and make enough noise so that perhaps someone passing in the nearby street would give the alarm and bring help?

There was a sudden silence in the patio. The bandits had so far made as little commotion as possible. Presently I could hear their low voices.

I heard an oath. De Boer's head and shoulders appeared in the window oval! His levelled projector

came through. Perhaps he would not have fired, but I did not dare take the chance. I was crouching almost under the muzzle, so I straightened, gripped it, and flung it up. I then slashed at his face with my knife, but he gripped my wrist with powerful fingers. My knife fell as he twisted my wrist. His projector had not fired. It was jammed between us. One of his huge arms reached in and encircled me.

"Damn you!"

He muttered it, but I shouted, "Fool! De Boer, the bandit!"

I was aware of a commotion out in the garden.

"... Bring all Nareda on our ears? De Boer, shut him up!"

I was gripping the projector, struggling to keep its muzzle pointed upwards. With a heave of his giant arms De Boer lifted me and jerked me bodily through the window. I fell on my feet, still fighting. But other

hands seized me. It was no use. I yielded suddenly. I panted:

"Enough!"

They held me. One of them growled. "Another shout and we will leave you here dead. Commander, *look!*"

My shirt was torn open. The electrode band about my chest was exposed! De Boer towered head and shoulders over me. I gazed up, passive in the grip of two or three of his men, and saw his face. His heavy jaw dropped as he gazed at my little diaphragms, the electrode.

He knew now for the first time that this was no private citizen he had assaulted. This official apparatus meant that I was a Government agent.

There was an instant of shocked silence. An expression grim and furious crossed the giant bandit's face.

"So this is it? Hans, careful—hold him!"

Jetta was still in her room, silent now. I heard Spawn's voice, close at hand in the patio.

"De Boer! Careful!" It was the most cautious of half-whispers.

Abruptly someone reached for my chest; jerked at the electrode; tore its fragile wires—the tiny grids and thumbnail amplifiers; jerked and ripped and flung the whole little apparatus to the garden path. But it sang its warning note as the wires broke. Up in Great New York Hanley knew then that catastrophe had fallen upon me.

For a brief instant the crestfallen bandit mumbled at what he had done. Then came Spawn's voice:

"Got him, De Boer? Good!"

Triumphant Spawn! He advanced across the garden with his heavy tread. And to me, and I am sure to De Boer as well, there came the swift realization that Spawn had been hiding safely in the background. But my detector was smashed now. It might have imaged

De Boer assailing me: but now that it was smashed, Spawn could act freely.

"Good! So you have him! Make away to the mine!"

I did not see De Boer's face at that instant. But I saw his weapon come up—an act wholly impulsive, no doubt. A flash of fury!

He levelled the projector, not at me, but at the oncoming Spawn.

"You damn liar!"

"De Boer—" It was a scream of terror from Spawn. But it came too late. The projector hissed; spat its tiny blue puff. The needle drilled Spawn through the heart. He toppled, flung up his arms, and went down, silently, to sprawl on his face across the garden path.

De Boer was cursing, startled at his own action. The men holding me tightened their grip. I heard Jetta cry out, but not at what had happened in the garden: she was unaware of that. One of the bandits had left the

group and climbed into her room. Her cry now was suppressed, as though the man's hand went over her mouth. And in the silence came his mumbled voice:

"Shut up, you!"

There was the sound of a scuffle in there. I tore at the men holding me.

"Let me go! Jetta! Come out!"

De Boer dashed for the window. I was still struggling. A hand cuffed me in the face. A projector rammed into my side.

"Stop it, fool American!"

De Boer came back with a chastened bandit ahead of him. The man was muttering and rubbing his shoulder, and De Boer said:

"Try anything like that again, Cartner, and I won't be so easy on you."



De Boer was dragging Jetta, holding her by a wrist. She looked like a terrified, half-grown boy, so small was she beside this giant. But the woman's lines of her, and the long dark hair streaming about her white face and over her shoulders, were unmistakable.

"His daughter." De Boer was chuckling. "The little Jetta."

All this had happened in certainly no more than five minutes. I realized that no alarm had been raised: the bandits had managed it all with reasonable quiet.

There were six of the bandits here, and De Boer, who towered over us all. I saw him now as a swaggering giant of thirty-odd, with a heavy-set smooth-shaved, handsome face.

He held Jetta off. "Damn, how you have grown, Jetta."

Someone said, "She knows too much."

And someone else, "We will take her with us. If you leave her here, De Boer—"

"Why should I leave her? Why? Leave her—for Perona?"

Then I think that for the first time Jetta saw her father's body lying sprawled on the path. She cried, "Philip!" Then she half turned and murmured: "Father!"

She wavered, almost falling. "Father—" She went down, fainting, falling half against me and against De Boer, who caught her slight body in his arms.

"Come, we'll get back. Drag him!"

"But you can't carry that girl out like that, De Boer."

"Into the house: there is an open door. Hans, go out and bring the car around to this side. Give me the cloaks. There is no alarm yet."

De Boer chuckled again. "Perona was nice to keep the police off this street to-night!"

We went into the kitchen. An auto-car, which to the village people might have been there on Spawn's mining business, slid quietly up to the side entrance. A cloak was thrown over Jetta. She was carried like a sack and put into the car.

I suddenly found an opportunity to break loose. I leaped and struck one of the men. But the others were too quickly on me. The kitchen table went over with a crash.

Then something struck me on the back of the head: I think it was the handle of De Boer's great knife. The kitchen and the men struggling with me faded. I went into a roaring blackness.

## **Chapter 11: Aboard the Bandit Flyer**

I was dimly conscious of being inside the cubby of the car, with bandits sitting over me. The car was rolling through the village streets. Ascending. We must be heading for Spawn's mine. I thought of Jetta. Then I heard her voice and felt her stir beside me.

The roaring in my head made everything dreamlike. I sank half into unconsciousness again. It seemed an endless interval, with only the muttering hiss of the car's mechanism and the confused murmurs of the bandits' voices.

Then my strength came. The cold sweat on me was drying in the night breeze that swept through the car as it climbed the winding ascent. I could see through its side oval a vista of bloated Lowland crags with moonlight on them.

It seemed that we should be nearly to the mine. We stopped. The men in the car began climbing out.

De Boer's voice: "Is he conscious now? I'll take the girl."

Someone bent over me. "You hear me?"

"Yes," I said.

I found myself outside the car. They held me on my feet. Someone gratuitously cuffed me, but De Boer's voice issued a sharp, low-toned rebuke.

"Stop it! Get him and the girl aboard."

There seemed thirty or forty men gathered here. Silent dark figures in black robes. The moonlight showed them, and occasionally one flashed a hand search-beam. It was De Boer's main party gathered to attack the mine.

I stood wavering on my feet. I was still weak and dizzy, with a lump on the back of my head where I had been struck. The scene about me was at first unfamiliar. We were in a rocky gully. Rounded broken walls. Caves and crevices. Dried ooze piled like a

ramp up one side. The moonlight struggled down through a gathering mist overhead.

I saw, presently, where we were. Above the mine, not below it: and I realized that the car had encircled the mine's cauldron and climbed to a height beyond it. Down the small gully I could see where it opened into the cauldron about a hundred feet below us. The lights of the mine winked in the blurred moonlight shadows.

The bandits led me up the gully. The car was left standing against the gully side where it had halted. De Boer, or one of his men, was carrying Jetta.

The flyer was here. We came upon it suddenly around a bend in the gully. Although I had only seen the nose if it earlier in the evening. I recognized this to be the same. It was in truth a strange looking flyer: I had never seen one quite like it. Barrel-winged, like a Jantzen: multi-propellored: and with folding helicopters for the vertical lifts and descent. And a great spreading fan-tail, in the British fashion. It rested on the rocks like a fat-winged bird with its long

cylindrical body puffed out underneath. A seventy-foot cabin: fifteen feet wide, possibly. A line of small window-ports; a circular glassite front to the forward control-observatory cubby, with the propellers just above it, and the pilot cubby up there behind them. And underneath the whole, a landing gear of the Fraser-Mood springed-cushion type: and an expanding, air-coil pontoon-bladder for landing upon water.

All this was usual enough. Yet, with the brief glimpses I had as my captors hurried me toward the landing incline, I was aware of something very strange about this flyer. It was all dead black, a bloated-bellied black bird. The moonlight struck it, but did not gleam or shimmer on its black metal surface. The cabin window-ports glowed with a dim blue-gray light from inside. But as I chanced to gaze at one a green film seemed to cross it like a shade, so that it winked and its light was gone. Yet a hole was there, like an eye-socket. An empty green hole.

We were close to the plane now, approaching the bottom of the small landing-incline. The wing over my

head was like a huge fat barrel cut length-wise in half. I stared up; and suddenly it seemed that the wing was melting. Fading. Its inner portion, where it joined the body, was clear in the moonlight. But the tips blurred and faded. An aspect curiously leprous. Uncanny. Gruesome.

They took me up the landing-incline. A narrow vaulted corridor ran length-wise of the interior, along one side of the cabin body. To my left as we headed for the bow control room, the corridor window-ports showed the rocks outside. To the right of the corridor, the ship's small rooms lay in a string. A metal interior. I saw almost nothing save metal in various forms. Grid floor and ceiling. Sheet metal walls and partitions. Furnishings and fabrics, all of spun metal. And all dead black.

We entered the control room. The two men holding me flung me in a chair. I had been searched. They had taken from me the tiny, colored magnesium light-flashes. How easy for the plans of men to go astray! Hanley and I had arranged that I was to signal the Porto Rican patrol-ship with those flares.



"Sit quiet!" commanded my guard.

I retorted, "If you hit me again, I won't."

De Boer came in, carrying Jetta. He put her in a chair near me, and she sat huddled tense. In the dim gray light of the control room her white face with its big staring dark eyes was turned toward me. But she did not speak, nor did I.

The bandits ignored us. De Boer moved about the room, examining a bank of instruments. Familiar instruments, most of them. The usual aero-controls and navigational devices. A radio audiphone transmitter and receiver, with its attendant eavesdropping cut-offs. And there was an ether-wave mirror-grid. De Boer bent over it. And then I saw him fastening upon his forehead an image-lens. He said:

"You stay here, Hans. You and Gutierrez. Take care of the girl and this fellow Grant. Don't hurt them."

Gutierrez was a swarthy Latin American. He smiled. "For why would I hurt him? You say he is worth much money to us, De Boer. And the girl, ah—"

De Boer towered over him. "Just lay a finger on her and you will regret it, Gutierrez! You stay at your controls. Be ready. This affair it will take no more than half an hour."

A man came to the control room entrance. "You come, Commander?"

"Yes. Right at once."

"The men are ready. From the mine we might almost be seen here. This delay—"

"Coming, Rausch."

But he lingered a moment more. "Hans, my finder will show you what I do. Keep watch. When we come back, have all ready for flight. This Grant had an alarm-detector. Heaven only knows what eavesdropping and relaying he has done. And for sure

there is hell now in Spawn's garden. The Nareda police are there, of course. They might track us up here."

He paused before me. "I think I would not cause trouble, Grant."

"I'm not a fool."

"Perhaps not." He turned to Jetta. "No harm will come to you. Fear nothing."

He wound his dark cloak about his giant figure and left the control room. In a moment, through the rounded observing pane beside me, I saw him outside on the moonlit rocks. His men gathered about him. There were forty of them, possibly, with ten or so left here aboard to guard the flyer.

And in another moment the group of dark-cloaked figures outside crept off in single file like a slithering serpent, moving down the rock defile toward where in the cauldron pit the lights of the mine shone on its dark silent buildings.



## **Chapter 12: The Attack on the Mine**

There was a moment when I had an opportunity to speak with Jetta. Gutierrez sat watchfully by the archway corridor entrance with a needle projector across his knees. The fellow Hans, a big, heavy-set half-breed Dutchman with a wide-collared leather jerkin and wide, knee-length pantaloons, laid his weapon carefully aside and busied himself with his image mirror. There would soon be images upon it, I knew: De Boer had the lens-finder on his forehead, and the scenes at the mine, as De Boer saw them would be flashed back to us here.

This Gutierrez was very watchful. A move on my part and I knew he would fling a needle through me.

My thoughts flew. Hanley had notified Porto Rico. The patrol-ship had almost enough time to get here by now.

I felt Jetta plucking at me. She whispered:

"They have gone to attack the mine."

"Yes."

"I heard it planned. Señor Perona—"

Her hurried whispers told me further details of Perona's scheme. So this was a pseudo attack! Perona would take advantage of it and hide the quicksilver. De Boer would return presently and escape. And hold me for ransom. I chuckled grimly. Not so easy for a bandit, even one as clever as De Boer at hiding in the Lowland depths to arrange a ransom for an agent of the United States. Our entire Lowland patrol would be after him in a day.

Jetta's swift whispers made it all clear to me. It was Perona's scheme.

She ended, "And my father—" Her voice broke; her eyes flooded suddenly with tears "Oh, Philip, he was good to me, my poor father."

I saw that the mirror before Hans was glowing with its coming image. I pressed Jetta's hand.

"Yes, Jetta."

One does not disparage the dead. I could not exactly subscribe to Jetta's appraisal of her parent, but I did not say so.

"Jetta, the mirror is on."

I turned away from her toward the instrument table. Gutierrez at the door raised his weapon. I said hastily, "Nothing. I—we just want to see the mirror."

I stood beside Hans. He glanced at me and I tried to smile ingratiatingly.

"This attack will be successful, eh, Hans?"

"Damn. I hope so."

The mirror was glowing. Hans turned a switch to dim the tube-lights of the room so that we might see the images better. It brought a protest from Gutierrez.

I swung around. "I'm not a fool! You can see me perfectly well: kill me if I make trouble. I want to see the attack."

"*Por Dios*, if you try anything—"

"I won't!"

"Shut!" growled Hans. "The audiphone is on. The big adventure—and the commander—leaves me here just to watch!"

A slit in the observatory pane was open. The dark figure of one of the bandits on guard outside came and called softly up to us.

"Started. Hans?"

"Starting."

"Should it go wrong, call out."

"Yes. But it will not."



"There was an alarm, relayed probably to Great New York, the commander said, from Spawn's garden. These cursed prisoners—"

"Shut! You keep watch out there. It is starting."

The guard slunk away. My attention went back to the mirror. An image was formed there now, coming from the eye of the lens upon De Boer's forehead. It swayed with his walking. He was evidently leading his men, for none of them were in the scene. The dark rocks were moving past. The lights of the mine were ahead and below, but coming nearer.

The audiphone hummed and crackled. And through it, De Boer's low-voiced command sounded:

"To the left is the better path. Keep working to the left."

The image of the rocks and the mine swung with a dizzying sweep as De Boer turned about. Then again he was creeping forward.

The mine lights came closer. De Beer's whispered voice said: "There they are!"

I could see the lights of the mine's guards flash on. A group of Spawn's men gathered before the smelter building. The challenge sounded.

"Who are you? Stop!"

And De Boer's murmur: "That is correct, as Perona said. They expect us. Well," he ended with a sardonic laugh, "expect us."

His projector went up. He fired. In the silence of the control room we could hear the audiphoned hiss of it, and see the flash in the mirror-scene. He had fired into the air.

Again his low voice to his men: "Hold steady. They will run."

The group of figures at the smelter separated, waved and scattered back into the deeper shadows. Their hand-lights were extinguished, but the moonlight

caught and showed them. They were running away; hiding in the crags. They fired a shot or two, high in the air.

De Boer was advancing swiftly now. The image swayed and shifted, raised and lowered rhythmically as he ran. And the dark shape of the smelter building loomed large as he neared it.

I felt Jetta beside me: heard her whisper: "Why, he should attack and then come back! Greko told my father—"

But De Boer was not coming back! He was dashing for the smelter entrance. Spawn's guards must have known then that there was something wrong. Their shots hissed, still fired high, and our grid sounded their startled shouts. Then as De Boer momentarily turned his head, I saw what was taking place to the side of him. A detachment of the bandits had followed the retreating guards. The bandits' shots were levelled now. Dim stabs of light in the gloom. One of the guards screamed as he was struck.

T

he attack was real! But it was over in a moment. Spawn's men, those who were not struck down, plunged away and vanished. Perona had disconnected the mine's electrical safeguards. The smelter door was sealed, but it gave before the blows of a metal bar two of De Boer's men were carrying.

In the unguarded, open strong-room, Perona, alone, was absorbed in his task of carrying the ingots of quicksilver down into the hidden compartment beneath its metal floor.

Our mirror was vague and dim now with a moving interior of the main smelter room as De Boer plunged through. At the strong-room entrance he paused, with his men crowding behind him. The figure of Perona showed in the vague light: he was stooping under the weight of one of the little ingots. Beside him yawned the small trap-opening leading downward.

He saw De Boer. He straightened, startled, and then shouted with a terrified Spanish oath. De Boer's projector was levelled: the huge, foreshortened muzzle of it blotted out half our image. It hissed its puff of light—a blinding flash on our mirror—in the midst of which the dark shape of Perona's body showed as it crumpled and fell. Like Spawn, he met instant death.

Jetta was gripping me. "Why—" Gutierrez was with us. Hans was bending forward, watching the mirror. He muttered, "Got him!"

I saw a chance to escape, and pulled at Jetta. But at once Gutierrez stepped backward.

"Like him I will strike you dead!" he said.

No chance of escape. I had thought Gutierrez absorbed by the mirror, but he was not. I protested vehemently:

"I haven't moved, you fool. I have no intention of moving."

And now De Boer and his men were carrying up the ingots. A man for each bar. A confusion of blurred swaying shapes, and low-voiced, triumphant murmurs from our disc.

Then De Boer was outside the smelter house, and we saw a little queue of the bandits carrying the treasure up the defile. Coming back here to the flyer. There was no pursuit; the mine guards were gone.

The triumphant bandits would be here in a few moments.

"*Ave Maria, que magnifico!*" Gutierrez had retreated to our doorway, more alert than ever upon me and Jetta. Hans called through the window-slit:

"All is well, Franks!"

"Got it?"

"Yes! Make ready."

There was a stir outside as several of the bandits hastened down the defile to meet De Boer. And the tread of others, inside the flyer at their posts, preparing for hasty departure.

Hans snapped off the audiphone and mirror. He bent over his control panel. "All is well, Gutierrez. In a moment we start."

Through the observatory window I saw the line of De Boer's men coming: Abruptly Hans gave a cry. "Look!"

A glow was in the room. A faint aura of light. And our disconnected instruments were crackling, murmuring with interference. Eavesdropping waves were here! Hans realised it: so did I.

But there was no need for theory. From outside came shouts.

"Patrol-ship!"

"Hurry!"

The ship, suddenly exposing its lights, was perfectly visible above us. Five thousand feet up, possibly. A tiny silver bird in the moonlight: but even with the naked eye I could see by its light pattern that it was the official Porto Rican patrol-liner. It saw us down here: recognized this bandit flyer, no doubt.

And it was coming down!

There was a confusion as the bandits rushed aboard. The patrol was dropping in a swift spiral. I watched tensely, holding Jetta, with the turmoil of the embarking bandits around me. Gutierrez stood with levelled weapon.

"They have not moved, Commander."

De Boer was here. The treasure was aboard.

"Ready, Hans. Lift us."

The landing portes clanged as they closed. Hans shoved at his switches. I heard the helicopter engines



thumping. A vertical lift: there was no space in this rocky defile for any horizontal take-away.

He was very calm, this De Boer. He sat in a chair at a control-bank of instruments unfamiliar to me.

"Full power, Hans: I tell you. Lift us!"

The ship was quivering. We lifted. The rocks of the gully dropped away. But the patrol-ship was directly over us. Was De Boer rushing into a collision?

"Now, forward, Hans."

We poised for the level flight. Did De Boer think he could out-distance this patrol-ship, the swiftest type of flyer in the Service? I knew that was impossible.

The silver ship overhead was circling, watchful. And as we levelled for forward flight it shot a warning searchlight beam down across our bow, ordering us to land.

De Boer laughed. "They think they have us!"

I saw his hand go to a switch. A warning siren resounded through our corridor, warning the bandits of De Boer's next move. But I did not know it then: the thing caught me unprepared.

De Boer flung another switch. My senses reeled. I heard Jetta cry out. My arm about her tightened.

A moment of strange whirling unreality. The control room seemed fading about me. The tube-lights dimmed. A green glow took their place—a lurid sheen in which the cubby and the tense faces of De Boer and Hans showed with ghastly pallor. Everything was unreal. The voices of De Boer and Hans sounded with a strange tonelessness. Stripped of the timber that made one differ from the other. Hollow ghosts of human voices. By the sound I could not tell which was De Boer and which was Hans.

The corridor was dark; all the lights on the ship faded into this horrible dead green. The window beside me had a film on it. A dead, dark opening where moonlight had been. Then I realized that I was

beginning to see through it once more. Starlight.  
Then the moonlight.

We had soared almost level with the descending patrol-ship. We went past it, a quarter of a mile away. Went past, and it did not follow. It was still circling.

I knew then what had happened. And why this bandit ship had seemed of so strange an aspect. We were invisible! At four hundred yards, even in the moonlight, the patrol could not distinguish us. Only ten of these X-flyers were in existence: they were the closest secret of the U. S. Anti-War Department. No other government had them except in impractical imitations. I had never even seen one before.

But this bandit ship was one. And I recalled that a year ago, a suppressed dispatch intimated that the Service had lost one—wrecked in the Lowlands and never found.

So this was that lost invisible flyer? De Boer, using it for smuggling, with Perona and Spawn as partners.

And now, De Boer making away in it with Spawn's treasure!

The bandit's hollow, toneless, unreal chuckle sounded in the gruesome lurid green of the control room.

"I think that surprised them!"

The tiny silver shape of the baffled local patrol-ship faded behind us as we flew northward over heavy, fantastic crags; far above the tiny twinkling lights of the village of Nareda—out over the sullen dark surface of the Nares Sea.

## **Chapter 13: The Flight to the Bandit Stronghold**

Suring this flight of some six hours—north, and then, I think, northeast—to the remote Lowland fastness where De Boer's base was located, I had no opportunity to learn much of the operation of this invisible flyer. But it was the one which had been lost. Wrecked, no doubt, and the small crew aboard it all killed. The vessel, however, was not greatly damaged: the crew were killed doubtless by escaping poisonous gases when the flyer struck.

How long it lay unfound, I cannot say. Perhaps, for days, it still maintained its invisibility, while the frantic planes of the U. S. Anti-War Department tried in vain to locate it. And then, with its magnetic batteries exhausting themselves, it must have become visible. Perona, making a solo flight upon Nareda business to Great London, came upon it. Perona, Spawn and De Boer were then in the midst of their smuggling activities. They salvaged the vessel secretly. De Boer, with an incongruous flair for mechanical science, was enabled in his bandit camp,

to recondition the flyer—building a workshop for the purpose, with money which Perona freely supplied.

Some of this I learned from De Boer, some is surmise: but I am sure it is close to the facts.

I have since had an opportunity—through my connection with this adventure which I am recording—of going aboard one of the X-flyers of the Anti-War Department, and seeing it in operation with its technical details explained to me. But since it is so important a Government secret, I cannot set it down here. The principles involved are complex: the postulates employed, and the mathematical formulae developing them in theory, are far too intricate for my understanding. Yet the practical workings are simple indeed. Some of them were understood as far back as 1920 and '30, when that pioneer of modern astrophysics, Albert Einstein, first proved that a ray of light is deflected from its normal straight path when passing through a magnetic field.

I am sorry that I cannot give here more than this vague hint of the workings of the fantastic invisible

flyers which to-day are so often the subject of speculation by the general public which never has seen them, and perhaps never will. But I think, too, that a lengthy pedantic discourse here would be out of place. And tiring. After all, I am trying to tell only what happened to me in this adventure. And to little Jetta.

A very strangely capable fellow, this young De Boer. A modern pirate: no other age could have produced him. He did not spare Perona's money, that was obvious. From his hidden camp he must have made frequent visits to the great Highland centers, purchasing scientific equipment: until now, when his path crossed mine. I found him surrounded by most of the every-day devices of our modern world. The village of Nareda was primitive: backward. Save for its modern lights, a few local audiphones and image-finders, and its official etheric connections with other world capitals, it might have been a primitive Latin American village of a hundred years ago.

But not so De Boer's camp, which presently I was to see. Nor this, his flyer, with which his smuggling

activities had puzzled Hanley's Office for so many months. There was nothing primitive here.

De Boer himself was a swaggering villain. I saw him now with his cloak discarded, in the normal tube-lights of the control room when, after a time, the mechanism of invisibility of the flyer was shut off. A fellow of six feet and a half at the very least, this De Boer. Heavy, yet with his great height and strength, lean and graceful. He wore a fabric shirt, with a wide-rolled collar. A wide belt of tanned hide, with lighters, a little electron drink-cooler and other nick-nackeries hanging from tasseled cords—and a naked, ugly-looking knife blade clipped beside a holster which held an old-fashioned exploding projector of leaden steel-tipped bullets.

His trousers were of leather, wide-flaring, ending at his brawny bare knees, with wide-cut, limp leather boots flapping about his calves in ancient piratical fashion. They had flaring soles, these shoes, for walking upon the Lowland caked ooze. The uppers were useless: I rather think he wore them because they were picturesque. He was a handsome fellow,



with rough-hewn features. A wide mouth, and very white, even teeth. A cruel mouth, when it went grim. But the smile was intriguing: I should think particularly so to women.

He had a way with him, this devil-may-care bandit. Strange mixture of a pirate of old and an outlaw of our modern world. With a sash at his waist, a red handkerchief about his forehead, and a bloody knife between his teeth. I could have fancied him a fabled pirate of the Spanish Main. A few hundred years ago when these dry Lowlands held the tossing seas. But I had seen him, so far, largely seated quietly in his chair at his instrument table, a cigarette dangling from his lips, and, instead of a red bandanna about his forehead, merely the elastic band holding the lens of his image-finder. It caught in the locks of his curly black hair. He pushed it askew; and then, since he did not need it now, discarded it altogether.

Where we went I could not surmise, except that we flew low over the sullen black waters of the Nares Sea and then headed northeast. We kept well below the

zero-height, with the dark crags of the Lowlands passing under us.

The night grew darker. Storm clouds obscured the moon; and it was then that De Boer shut off the mechanism of invisibility. The control room, with only the watchful Gutierrez now in it—besides De Boer, Jetta and myself—was silent and orderly. But there were sounds of roistering from down the ship's corridor. The bandits, with this treasure of the radiumized quicksilver ingots aboard, were already triumphantly celebrating.

I sat whispering with Jetta. De Boer, busy with charts and navigational instruments, ignored us, and Gutierrez, so long as we did not move, seemed not to object to our whispers.

The night slowly passed. De Boer served us food, calling to one of his men to shove a slide before us. For himself, he merely drank his coffee and an alcoholic drink at his instrument table, while absorbed in his charts.

The roistering of the men grew louder. De Boer leaped to his feet, cursed them roundly, then went back to his calculations. He stood once before Jetta, regarding her with a strange, slow smile which made my heart pound. But he turned away in a moment.

The bandits, for all De Boer's admonitions, were now ill-conditioned for handling this flyer. But I saw, through the small grid-opening in the control room ceiling, the pilot in his cubby upon the wing-top. He sat alert and efficient, with his lookout beside him.

The night presently turned really tumultuous, with a great wind overhead, and storm clouds of ink, shot through occasionally by lightning flashes. We flew lower, at minus 2,000 feet, on the average. The heavy air was sultry down here, with only a dim blurred vista of the depths beneath us. I fancied that now we were bending eastward, out over the great basin pit of the mid-Atlantic area. No vessels passed us, or, if they did, I did not sight them.

De Boer had a detector on his table. Occasionally it would buzz with calls: liners or patrols in our general

neighborhood. He ignored them with a sardonic smile. Once or twice, when our dim lights might have been sighted, he altered our course sharply. And, when at one period we passed over the lights of some Lowland settlement, he flung us again into invisibility until we were beyond range.

I had, during these hours, ample opportunity to whisper with Jetta. But there was so little for us to say. I knew all of Spawn's and Perona's plot. Both were dead: it was De Boer with whom we were menaced now. And as I saw his huge figure lounging at his table, and his frowning, intent face, the vision of the aged, futile Perona, who had previously been my adversary, seemed inoffensive indeed.

De Boer obviously was pleased with himself. He had stolen half a million dollars of treasure, and was making off with it to his base in the depths. He would smuggle these ingots into the world markets at his convenience; months from now, probably. Meanwhile, what did he intend to do with me? And Jetta? Ransom me? I wondered how he could manage it. And the thought pounded me. What about Jetta? I felt now

that she was all the world to me. Her safety, beyond any thought of smugglers or treasure, was all that concerned me. But what was I going to do about it?

I pressed her hand. "Jetta, you're not too frightened, are you?"

"No, Philip."

Her mind, I think, was constantly on her father, lying dead back there on his garden path. I had not spoken of him, save once. She threatened instant tears, and I stopped.

"Do not be too frightened. We'll get out of this."

"Yes."

"He can't escape. Jetta; he can't hide. Why, in a day or so all the patrols of the United States Lowland Service will be after us!"

But if the patrol-ships assailed De Boer, if he found things going badly—he could so easily kill Jetta and

me. He might be caught, but we would never come through it alive.

My thoughts drifted along, arriving nowhere, just circling in the same futile rounds. I was aware of Jetta falling asleep beside me, her face against my shoulder, her fingers clutching mine. She looked like a half grown, slender, ragged boy. But her woman's hair lay thick on my arm, and one of the dark tresses fell to my hand. I turned my fingers in it. This strange little woman. Was my love for her foredoomed to end in tragedy? I swore then that I would not let it be so.

## Chapter 14: Jetta Takes a Hand

I came from my reverie to find De Boer before me. He was standing with legs planted wide, arms folded across his deep chest, and on his face an ironic smile.

"So tired! My little captives, *di mi*! You look like babes lost in a wood."

I disengaged myself from Jetta, resting her against a cushion, and she did not awaken. I stood up, fronting De Boer.

"What are you going to do with me?" I demanded.

He held his ironic smile. "Take you to my camp. You'll be well hidden, no one can follow me. My X-flyer's a very handy thing to have, isn't it?"

"So you're the smuggler I was sent after?"

That really amused him. "Er—yes. Those tricksters, Perona and Spawn—we were what you would call partners. He had—the perfumed Perona—what he thought was a clever scheme for us. I was to take all

the risk, and he and Spawn get most of the money. Chah! They thought I was imbecile—pretending to attack a treasure and being such a fool that I would not seize it for myself! Not De Boer!" He chuckled. "Well, so very little did they know me. No treasure yet touched De Boer's fingers without lingering!"

He was in a talkative mood, and drew up his chair and slouched in it. I saw that he had been drinking some alcholite beverage, not enough to befuddle him, but enough to take the keen edge off his wits, and make him want to talk.

"Sit down, Grant."

"I'll stand."

"As you like."

"What are you going to do with me?" I demanded again. "Try to ransom me for a fat price from the United States?"



He smiled sourly. "You need not be sarcastic, young lad. The better for you if I get a ransom."

"Then I hope you get it."

"Perona's idea," he added. "I will admit it looked possible: I did not know then you had Government protection." He went grim. "That was Perona and Spawn's trickery. Well, they paid for it. No one plays De Boer false and lives to tell it. Perona and Spawn wanted to get rid of you—because you annoyed them."

"Did I?"

"With the little Jetta, I fancy." His gaze went to the sleeping Jetta and back to me. "Perona was very sensitive where this little woman was concerned. Why not? An oldish fool like him—"

I could agree with that, but I did not say so.

I said, "You'd better cast me loose, Jetta and me. I suppose you realize, De Boer, that you'll have the

patrols like a pack of hounds after you. Jetta is a Nareda citizen: the United States will take that up. There's the theft of the treasure. And as you say, I'm a Government agent."

He nodded. "Your Government is over-zealous in protecting its agents. That I know, Grant. I might have left you alone, there in the garden, when I realized it. But that, by damn, was too late! Live men talk. Any way, if I cannot ransom you, to kill you is very easy. And dead men are shut-mouthed."

"I'm still alive, De Boer."

He eyed me. "You talk brave."

This condescending, amused giant!

I retorted. "How are you going to ransom me?"

"That," he said. "I have not yet planned it. A delicate business."

I ventured, "And Jetta?" My heart was beating fast.

"Jetta," he said with a sudden snap, "is none of your business."

Again his gaze went toward her. "I might marry her: why not? I am not wholly a villain. I could marry her legally in Cape Town, with all the trappings of clergy—and be immune from capture under the laws there. If she is seventeen. I have forgotten her age, it's been so long since I knew her. Is she seventeen? She does not look it."

I said shortly. "I don't know how old she is."

"But we can ask her when she awakens, can't we?"

He was amusing himself with me. And yet, looking back on it now, I believe he was more than half serious. From his pouch he drew a small cylinder.

"Have a drink, Grant. After all I bear you no ill-will. A man can but follow his trade: you were trying to be a good Government agent."

"Thanks."

"And then you may make it possible for me to pick a nice ransom. Here."

"I hope so." I declined the drink.

"Afraid for your wits?"

I said impulsively, "I want all my wits to make sure you handle this ransom properly, De Boer. I'm as interested as you are: in that at least, we are together."

He grinned, tipped the cylinder at his lips for a long drink.

"Quite so—a mutual interest. Let us be friends over it."

His gaze wandered back to Jetta. He added slowly:

"She is very lovely, Grant. A little woodland flower, just ready for plucking." A sentimental tone, but there was in his expression a ribald flippancy that sent a shudder through me. "She has quite overcome you,

Grant. Well, why not me as well? I am certainly more of a man than you. We must admit that Perona had a good eye."

My thoughts were wandering. Suppose I could not find an opportunity to escape with Jetta? De Boer might successfully ransom me and take her to Cape Town. Or if he feared that to try for the ransom would be too dangerous, doubtless he would kill me out of hand. An ill outcome indeed! Nor could I forget that there was half a million of treasure involved.

It was obvious to me that Hanley would not permit the patrol-ships to attack De Boer with the lives of Jetta and myself at stake. Hanley knew, or suspected, that De Boer was operating an invisible flyer, but I did not see how that could help Hanley much. Markes, acting for Nareda, would doubtless be willing to ransom Jetta: the United States would ransom me. I must urge the ransom plan, because for all the money in the world I would not endanger Jetta, nor let this bandit carry her off.

Or could I escape with her, and still find some means to save the treasure? It was Jetta's treasure now, two-thirds of it, for it had legally belonged to her father. Could I save it, and her as well?

Not by any move of mine, here now on this flyer. That was impossible. In De Boer's camp, perhaps. But that, too, I doubted. He was too clever a scoundrel to be lax in guarding me.

But in the effecting of a ransom—the exchange of me, and perhaps Jetta, for a sum of money—that would be a delicate transaction, and some little thing could easily go wrong for De Boer. There would be my chance. I would have to make something go wrong! Get in his confidence now so that I would have some say in arranging the details of the ransom. Make him think I was only concerned for my own safety. Appear clever in helping plan the exchange. And then so manipulate the thing that I could escape with Jetta and save the treasure—and the ransom money as well. And capture De Boer, since that was what Hanley had sent me out to accomplish.

Thoughts fly swiftly. All this flashed to me. I had no details as yet. But that I must get into De Boer's confidence stood but clearly.

I said abruptly, "De Boer, since we are to be friends—"

"So you prefer to sit down now?"

"Yes." I had drawn a small settle to face him. "De Boer, do you intend to ask a ransom for Jetta?"

"You insist with that question?"

"That is my way. Then we can understand each other. Do you?"

"No," he said shortly.

I frowned. "I think I could get you a big price."

"I think I should prefer the little Jetta, Grant."

I held myself outwardly unmoved. "I don't blame you. But you will ransom me? It can be worked out. I have some ideas."

"Yes," he agreed. "It can be worked perhaps. I have not thought of details yet. You are much concerned for your safety, Grant? Fear not."

An amused thought evidently struck him. He added. "It occurs to me how easy, if I am going to ransom you, it will be for me to send you back dead. You might, if I send you back alive, tell them a lot of things about me."

"I will not talk."

"Not," he said, "if I close your mouth for good."

I had no retort. There was no answering such logic; and with his murders of Spawn and Perona, and the deaths of some of the police guards at the mine, the murder of me would not put him in much worse a position.

He was laughing ironically. Suddenly he checked himself.

"Well, Jetta! So you have awakened?"



Jetta was sitting erect. How long she had been awake, what she had heard. I could not say. Her gaze went from De Boer to me, and back again.

"Yes, I am awake."

It seemed that the look she flashed me carried a warning. But whatever it was, I had no chance of pondering it, for it was driven from my mind by surprise at her next words.

"Awake, yes! And interested, hearing this Grant bargain with you for his life."

It surprised De Boer as well. But the alcholite had dulled his wits, and Jetta realized this, and presumed upon it.

"Ho!" exclaimed De Boer. "Our little bird is angry!"

"Not angry. It is contempt."

Her look to me now held contempt. It froze me with startled chagrin; but only for an instant, and then the

truth swept me. Strange Jetta! I had thought of her only as a child; almost, but not quite a woman. A frightened little woodland fawn.

"Contempt, De Boer. Is he not a contemptuous fellow, this American?"

Again I caught her look and understood it. This was a different Jetta. No longer helplessly frightened, but a woman, fighting. She had heard De Boer calmly saying that he might send me back dead—and she was fighting now for me.

De Boer took another drink, and stared at her. "What is this?"

She turned away. "Nothing. But if you are going to ransom me—"

"I am not, little bird."

She showed no aversion for him, and it went to his head, stronger than the drink. "Never would I ransom you!"

He reached for her, but nimbly she avoided him. Acting, but clever enough not to overdo it. I held myself silent: I had caught again the flash of a warning gaze from her. She had fathomed my purpose. Get his confidence. Beguile him. And woman is so much cleverer than the trickiest man at beguiling!

"Do not touch me, De Boer! He tried that. He held my hand in the moonlight—to woo me with his clever words."

"Hah! Grant, you hear her?"

"And I find him now not a man, but a craven—"

"But you will find me a man, Jetta." De Boer was hugely amused. "See Grant, we are rivals! You and Perona, then you and me. It is well for you that I fear you not, or I would run my knife through you now."

I could not mistake Jetta's shudder. But De Boer did not see it, for she covered it by impulsively putting her hand upon his arm.

"Did you—did you kill my father?" She stumbled over the question. But she asked it with a childlike innocence sufficiently real to convince him.

"I? Why—" He recovered from his surprise. "Why no, little bird. Who told you that I did?"

"No one. I—no one has said anything about it." She added slowly, "I hoped that it was not you, De Boer."

"Me? Oh no: it was an accident." He shot me a menacing glance. "I will explain it all. Jetta. Your father and I were friends for years—"

"Yes. I know. Often he spoke to me of you. Many times I asked him to let me meet you."

They were ignoring me. But Gutierrez, lurking in the door oval, was not: I was well aware of that.

"I remember you from years ago, little Jetta."

"And I remember you."

I understand the rationality of her purpose. She could easily get De Beer's confidence. She had known him when a child. Her father had been his business partner, presumably his friend. And I saw her now cleverly altering her status here. She had been a captive, allied with me. She was changing that. She was now Spawn's daughter, here with her dead father's friend.

She turned a gaze of calm aversion upon me. "Unless you want him here, De Boer. I would rather talk to you—without him."

He leaped to his feet. "Hah! that pleases me, little Jetta! Gutierrez, take this fellow away."

The Spanish-American came slouching forward. "The girl's an old friend, Commander? You never told me that."

"Because it is no business of yours. Take him away. Seal him in D-cubby."

I said sullenly. "I misjudged both of you."

Jetta's gaze avoided me. As Gutierrez shoved me roughly down the corridor, De Boer laughed, and his voice came back: "Do not be afraid. We will find some safe way of ransoming you—dead or alive!"

I was flung on a bunk in one of the corridor cubbies, and the door sealed upon me.

## Part 3

## **Chapter 15: In the Bandit Camp**

The dark cave, with its small spots of tube-light mounted upon movable tripods, was eery with grotesque swaying shadows. The bandit camp. Hidden down here in the depths of the Mid-Atlantic Lowlands. An inaccessible retreat, this cave in what once was the ocean floor. Only a few years ago water had been here, water black and cold and soundless. Tremendous pressure, with three thousand or more fathoms of the ocean above it. Fishes had roamed these passages, no doubt. Strange monsters of the deeps: sightless, or with eyes like phosphorescent torches.

Black-garbed figures move in ghastly greenness as the invisible flyer speeds on its business of ransom.

But the water was gone now. Blue ooze was caked upon the cave floor. Eroded walls; niches and tiny gullies; crevices and an arching dome high overhead. A fantastic cave—no one, seeing it as I saw it that morning at dawn, could have believed it was upon this earth. From where De Boer had put me—on the



flat top of a small, butte-like dome near the upper end of the sloping cave floor—all the area of this strange bandit camp was visible to me.

A little tent of parchment was set upon the dome-top.

"Yours," said De Boer, with a grin. "Make yourself comfortable. Gutierrez will be your willing servant, until we see about this ransom. It will have to be one very large, for you are a damn trouble to me, Grant. And a risk. Food will come shortly. Then you can sleep: I think you will want it."

He leaped from the little butte, leaving the taciturn ever-watchful Gutierrez sitting cross-legged on the ledge near me, with his projector across his knees.

The cave was irregularly circular, with perhaps, a hundred-feet diameter and a ceiling fifty feet high. A drift of the fetid, Lowland air went through it—into a rift at this upper end, and out through the lower passage entrance which sloped downward thirty feet and debouched upon a rippled ramp of ooze outside. It was daylight out there now. From my perch I could

see the sullen heavy walls of a ridge. Mist hung against them, but the early morning sunlight came down in shafts penetrating the mist and striking the oily surface of a spread of water left here in the depths of a cauldron.

De Boer's flyer was outside. We had landed by the shore of the sea, and the bandits had pushed the vehicle into an arching recess which seemed as though made to hide it. All this camp was hidden. Arching crags of the ridge-wall jutted out over the cave entrance. From above, any passing flyer—even though well below the zero-height—would see nothing but this black breathing sea, lapping against its eroded, fantastic shore-line.

Within the cave, there was only a vague filtering daylight from the lower entrance, a thin shaft from the rift overhead, and the blue tube-light, throwing great shadows of the tents and the men against the black rock walls.

There seemed perhaps a hundred of the bandits here. A semi-permanent camp, by its aspect. Grey

parchment tents were set up about the floor, some small, others more elaborate. It seemed as though it were a huddled little group of buildings in the open air, instead of in a cave. One tent, just at the foot of my dome, seemed De Boer's personal room. He went into it after leaving me, and came out to join the main group of his fellows near the center of the cave where a large electron stove, and piped water from a nearby subterranean freshet, and a long table set with glassware and silver, stood these men for kitchen and eating place.

The treasure had not yet been brought in from the flyer. But, from what I overheard, it seemed that the radiumized ingots of the ill-fated Spawn and Perona were to be stored for a year at least, here in this cave. I could see the strong-room cubby. It was hewn from the rock of the cave wall, its sealed-grid door-oval set with metal bars.

I saw also what seemed a small but well-equipped machine shop, in a recess room at one side of the cave. Men were working in there under the light of tubes. And there was a niche hollowed out in the wall

to make a room for De Boer's instruments—ether-wave receivers and transmitters, the aerial receiving wires of which stretched in banks along the low ceiling.

There was no activity in there now, except for one man who was operating what I imagined might be an aerial insulator, guarding the place from any prying search-vibrations.

The main cave was a bustle of activity. The arriving bandits were greeting their fellows and exchanging news. The men who had been left here were jubilant at the success of the Chief's latest enterprise. Bottles were unsealed and they began to prepare the morning meal.

My presence caused considerable comment. I was a complication at which most of the men were ill pleased, especially when the arriving bandits told who I was, and that the patrols of the United States were doubtless even now trying to find me.

But De Boer silenced the grumbling with rough words.

"My business, not yours. But you will take your share of his ransom, won't you? Have done!"

And Jetta, she had caused comment also. But when the bottles were well distributed the grumbling turned to ribald banter which made me shudder that it should fall upon Jetta's ears. De Boer had kept his men away from her, shoving them aside when they crowded to see her. She was in a little tent now, not far from the base of my ledge.

My meal presently was brought from where most of the bandits now were roistering at the long table in the center of the cave.

"Eat," said Gutierrez. "I eat with you, Americano. *Madre Mia*, when you are ransomed away from here it will please me! De Boer is fool, with taking such a chance."

With the meal ended, another guard came to take Gutierrez' place and I was ordered into my tent. The routine of the camp, it seemed, was to use the daylight hours for the time of sleep. There were lookouts and guards at the entrance, and a little arsenal of ready weapons stocked in the passage. The men at the table were still at their meal. It would end, I did not doubt, by most of them falling into heavy alcoholic slumber.

I was tired, poisoned by the need of sleep. I lay on fabric cushions piled in one corner of my tent. But sleep would not come; my thoughts ran like a tumbling mountain torrent, and as aimlessly. I hoped that Jetta was sleeping. De Boer was now at the center table with his men. Hans was guarding Jetta. He was a phlegmatic, heavy Dutchman, and seemed decent enough.

I wondered what Hanley might be doing to rescue me. But as I thought about it, I could only hope that his patrols would not find us out here. An attack and most certainly De Boer and his men in their anger would kill me out of hand. And possibly Jetta also.

I had not had a word alone with Jetta since that scene in the control room. When we disembarked, she had stayed close by De Boer. But I knew that Jetta had fathomed my purpose, that she was working to the same end. We must find a way of arranging the ransom which would give us an opportunity to escape.

I pondered it. And at last an idea came to me, vague in all its details, as yet. But it seemed feasible, and I thought it would sound plausible to De Boer. I would watch my chance and explain it to him. Then I realized how much aid Jetta would be. She would agree with my plan, and help me convince him. And when the crucial time came, though I would be a captive, watched by Gutierrez, bound and gagged, perhaps—Jetta would be at liberty. De Boer and Gutierrez would not be on their guard with her.

I drifted off to sleep, working out the details of my plan.

## **Chapter 16: Planning The Ransom**

I was awakened by the sound of low voices outside my tent. Jetta's voice, and De Boer's, and, mingled with them, the babble of the still hilarious bandits in the center of the cave. But there were only a few left now; most of them had fallen into heavy slumber. I had been asleep for several hours, I figured. The daylight shadows outside the cave entrance showed that it was at least noon.

I lay listening to the voices which had awakened me. De Boer was saying:

"But why, Jetta, should I bother with your ideas? I know what is best. This ransom is too dangerous to arrange." His voice sounded calmly good humored; I could hear in it now more than a trace of alcoholic influence. He added, "I think we had better kill him and have done. My men think so, too; already I have caused trouble with them, by bringing him."

It jolted me into full wakefulness.



Jetta's voice: "No! I tell you it can be arranged, Hendrick. I have been thinking of it, planning it—"

"Child! Well what? The least I can do is listen; I am no pig-headed American. Say it out. What would you do to ransom him safely?"

They were just at the foot of my ledge, in front of De Boer's tent. Their voices rose so that I could hear them plainly. For all my start at being awakened to hear my death determined upon, I recall that I was almost equally startled by Jetta's voice. Her tone, her manner with De Boer. Whatever opportunities they had had for talking together, the change in their relationship was remarkable. De Boer was now flushed with drink, but for all that he had obviously still a firm grip upon his wits. And I heard Jetta now urging her ideas upon him with calm confidence. An outward confidence; yet under it there was a vibrant emotion suppressed within her even tone; a hint of tremulous fright; a careful calculation of the effect she might be making upon De Boer. Had he not been intoxicated—with drink and with her—he might have sensed it. But he did not.

"Hendrick, it can be done. A big price. Why not?"

"Because if we are trapped and caught, of what use is the price we might have gotten? Tell me that, wise one?"

"We will not be trapped. And suppose you kill him—won't they track you just the same, Hendrick?"

"No. We would leave his body on some crag where it would be found. The patrols would more quickly tire of chasing a killer when the damage is done. They want Grant alive."

"Then let them have him alive—for a big price. Hendrick, listen—"

"Well, what?" he demanded again. "What is your plan?"

"Why—well, Hendrick, like this—"

She stammered, and I realized that she had no plausible plan. She was fumbling, groping, urging

upon De Boer that I must be ransomed alive. But she had not good reason for it.

"Well?" he prompted impatiently.

"You—can you raise Great New York on the audiphone, Hendrick?"

"Yes," he said.

"Hanley's office?"

"Yes, no doubt. Chah—that would give him a start, wouldn't it? De Boer calmly calling him!"

He was laughing. I heard what sounded as though he were gulping another drink. "By damn, Jetta, you are not the timid bird you look. Call Hanley, eh?"

"Yes. Can it be done and still bar his instruments from locating us?"

"Yes, and bar his television. Believe it, Jetta. I have every device for hiding. But—call Hanley!"

"Why not? ... Hendrick, stop!"

I started. It seemed that he was embracing her; forcing half drunken caresses upon her.

I scrambled through my tent doorway, but Gutierrez, who had come back on guard, at once seized me.

"*Hui*—so haste! Back, you."

The Spaniard spoke softly, and he was grinning. "The chief plays with woman's words, no? Charming señorita, though she dresses like a boy. But that is the more charming, eh? Listen to her, Grant."

He gripped me, and prodded my side with the point of his knife blade. "Lie down Americano: we will listen."

Jetta was insisting. "Hendrick, stop!"

"Why?"

I could see them now. They were seated before the opening of De Boer's tent. A little stove in front of

them. Coffee for Jetta, who was seated cross-legged, pouring it; a bowl of drink for De Boer. And some baked breadstuff dainties on a platter.

"Hendrick—"

She pushed him away as he leaned to embrace her. Although she was laughing with him, I could only guess at the chill of fear that might be in her heart.

"Foolish, Hendrick!"

"Foolish little bird, Jetta mine."

"You—it is you who are foolish, Hendrick." She slid from his embrace and held her brimming coffee cup balanced before her, to ward him off. "You think I am really clever, so trust me, Hendrick. Oh there is a great future for us: you say I inspire you; let me! Hendrick De Boer, Chieftain of the Lowlands! My father would have helped you become that. You can build a little empire. Hendrick—why not? Father wanted to make you President of Nareda. Why not build your own Lowland Empire? We have a hundred

men now? Why not gather a thousand? Ten thousand?  
An empire!"

"*Ave Maria*," from Gutierrez. "This *niña* thinks big thoughts!"

De Boer raised his bowl. "An empire—De Boer of the Lowlands! Go on; you amuse me. We have a nice start, with this treasure."

"Yes. And the ransom money. But you will take me first to Cape Town, Hendrick? We can be married there: I am seventeen in a month."

"Of course, Jetta. Haven't I promised?" There was no convincingness to me in the way he said it. "Of course. To Cape Town for our marriage."

"Stop! Hendrick, be serious!" He had reached for her again. "Don't be a fool, Hendrick."

"Very well," he said. "I am all serious. What is your plan?"

She was more resourceful this time. She retorted, "This craven Grant, he fears for his life—but he is very smart, Hendrick. I think he is scheming every moment how he can be safely ransomed."

"Hah! No doubt of that!"

"And he has had experience with Chief Hanley. He knows Hanley's methods, how Hanley will act. Let us see what Grant says of this."

She had no plan of her own, but she hoped that by now I had one! And she was making an opportunity for me to put it before De Boer.

He said, "There is sense to that, Jetta. If there is any way to fool Hanley, that craven American has no doubt thought it out."

She held another drink before him. "Yes. Let us see what he says."

He drank; and again as they were near together he caressed her.

"What a schemer you are, little bird. You and I are well matched, eh?"

"Gutierrez may be watching us!" she warned.

They suddenly looked up and saw Gutierrez and me.

"Hah!" Fortunately it struck De Boer into further good humor. "Hah—we have an audience! Bring down the prisoner, Gutierrez! Let us see if his wits can get him out of this plight. Come down, Grant!"

Gutierrez shoved me down the ladder ahead of him. De Boer stood up and seized me. His great fingers dug into my shoulders.

"Sit down, American! It seems you are not to die. *Perhaps* not."

The strength of his fingers was hurting me: he hoped I would wince. Mine was now an ignominious role, indeed, yet I knew it was best.

I gasped. "Don't do that: you hurt!"



He chuckled and cast me loose. I added, with a show of spirit, "You are a bullying giant. Just because you are bigger than I am—"

"Hear that, Jetta? The American finds courage with his coming ransom!"

He shoved me to the ground. Gutierrez grinned, and withdrew a trifle. Jetta avoided meeting my gaze.

"Have some coffee," De Boer offered. "Alcohol is not good for you. Now say: have you any suggestions on how I can safely ransom you?"

It seemed that Jetta was holding her breath with anxiety. But I answered with an appearance of ready eagerness. "Yes. I have. I can arrange it with complete safety to you, if you give me a chance."

"You've got your chance. Speak out."

"You promise you will return me alive? Not hurt me?"

"De duvel—yes! You have my promise. But your plan had better be very good."

"It is."

I told it carefully. The details of it grew with my words. Jetta joined in it. But, most of all, it did indeed sound feasible. "But it must be done at once," I urged. "The weather is right; to-night it will be dark; overcast; not much wind. Don't you think so?"

He sent Gutierrez to the cave's instrument room to read the weather forecast instruments. My guess was right.

"To-night then," I said. "If we linger, it only gives Hanley more time to plan trickery."

"Let us try and raise him now," Jetta suggested.

The Dutchman, Hans, had joined us. He too, seemed to think my ideas were good.

Except for the guards at the cave entrance, all the other bandits were far gone in drink. With Hans and Gutierrez, we went to the instrument room to call Hanley. As we crossed the cave, with Hans and De Boer walking ahead together, De Boer spoke louder than he realized, and the words came back to me.

"Not so bad, Hans? We will use him—but I am not a fool. I'll send him back dead, not alive! A little knife-thrust, just at the end! Safest for us, eh, Hans?"

## **Chapter 17: Within the Black Sack**

We left the bandit stronghold just after nightfall that same day. There were five of us on the X-flyer. Jetta and De Boer, Hans and Gutierrez and myself. The negotiations with Hanley had come through satisfactorily; to De Boer, certainly, for he was in a triumphant mood as they cast off the aero and we rose over the mist-hung depths.

It was part of my plan, this meager manning of the bandit ship. But it was mechanically practical: there was only Hans needed at the controls for this short-time flight: with De Boer plotting his course, working out his last details—and with Gutierrez to guard me.

De Boer had been quite willing to take no other men—and most of them were too far gone in their cups to be of much use. I never have fathomed De Boer's final purpose. He promised Jetta now that when I was successfully ransomed he would proceed to Cape Town by comfortable night flights and marry her. It pleased Gutierrez and Hans, for they wanted none of their comrades. The treasure was still on the flyer.

The ransom gold would be added to it. I think that De Boer, Gutierrez and Hans planned never to return to their band. Why, when the treasure divided so nicely among three, break it up to enrich a hundred?

I shall never forget Hanley's grim face as we saw it that afternoon on De Boer's image-grid. My chief sat at his desk with all his location detectors impotent, listening to my disembodied voice explaining what I wanted him to do. My humble, earnest, frightened desire to be ransomed safely at all costs! My plea that he do nothing to try and trap De Boer!

It hurt me to appear so craven. But with it all, I knew that Hanley understood. He could imagine my leering captor standing at my elbow, prompting my words, dictating my very tone—prodding me with a knife in the ribs. I tried, by every shade of meaning, to convey to Hanley that I hoped to escape and save the ransom money. And I think that he guessed it, though he was wary in the tone he used for De Boer to hear. He accepted, unhesitatingly, De Boer's proposition: assured us he would do nothing to assail De Boer; and

never once did his grim face convey a hint of anything but complete acquiescence.

We had President Markes on the circuit. De Boer, with nothing to lose, promised to return Jetta with me. In gold coin, sixty thousand U. S. dollar-standards for me; a third as much from Nareda, for Jetta.

The details were swiftly arranged. We cut the circuit. I had a last look at Hanley's face as the image of it faded. He seemed trying to tell me to do the best I could; that he was powerless, and would do nothing to jeopardize my life and Jetta's. Everything was ready for the affair to be consummated at once. The weather was right; there was time for Hanley and De Boer each comfortably to reach the assigned meeting place.

We flew, for the first hour, nearly due west. The meeting place was at 35 deg. N. by 59 deg. W., a few hundred miles east by north of the fairy-like mountaintop of the Bermudas. Our charts showed the Lowlands there to run down to what once was measured as nearly three thousand fathoms—called

now eighteen thousand feet below the zero-height. A broken region, a depth-ridge fairly level, and no Lowland sea, nor any settlements in the neighborhood.

The time was set at an hour before midnight. No mail, passenger or freight flyers were scheduled to pass near there at that hour, and, save for some chance private craft, we would be undisturbed. The ransom gold was available to Hanley. He had said he would bring it in his personal Wasp.

The details of the exchange were simple. Hanley, with only one mechanic, would hover at the zero-height, his Wasp lighted so that we could see it plainly. The wind drift, according to forecast, would be southerly. At 11 P.M. Hanley would release from his Wasp a small helium-gas balloon-car—a ten-foot basket with the supporting gas bag above it, weighted so that it would slowly descend into the depths, with a southern drift.

Our flyer, invisible and soundless, would pick up the balloon-car at some point in its descent. The gold

would be there, in a black casket. De Boer would take the gold, deposit Jetta and me in the car, and release it again. And when the balloon finally settled to the rocks beneath, Hanley could pick it up. No men would be hidden by Hanley in that basket. De Boer had stipulated that when casting loose the balloon, its car must be swept by Hanley with a visible electronic ray. No hidden men could withstand that blast!

Such was the arrangement with Hanley. I was convinced that he intended to carry it out to the letter. He would have his own invisible X-flyer in the neighborhood, no doubt. But it would not interfere with the safe transfer of Jetta and me.

That De Boer would carry out his part, Hanley could only trust. He had said so this afternoon bluntly. And De Boer had laughed and interposed his voice in our circuit.

"Government money against these two lives, Hanley! Of course you have to trust me!"



It was a flight, for us, of something less than four hours to the meeting place. Hans was piloting, seated alone in the little cubby upon the forward wing-base, directly over the control room. De Boer, with Jetta at his side, worked over his course and watched his instrument banks. I was, at the start of the flight, lashed in a chair of the control room, my ankles and wrists tied and Gutierrez guarding me.

Jetta did not seem to notice me. She did not look at me, nor I at her. She pretended interest only in the success of the transfer; in her father's treasure on board, the coming ransom money, and then a flight to Cape Town, dividing the treasure only with Hans and Gutierrez; and in her marriage with De Boer. She said she wanted me returned to Hanley alive; craven coward that I was, still I did not deserve death. De Boer had agreed. But I knew that at last, as they tumbled me into the basket, someone would slip a knife into me!

I had, as we came on board, just the chance for a few whispered sentences with Jetta. But they were enough! We both knew what we had to do. Desperate

expedient, indeed! It seemed more desperate now as the time approached than it had when I planned it.

The weather at 7 P.M. was heavily overcast. Sultry, breathless, with solid, wide-flung cloud areas spread low over the zero-height. Night settled black in the Lowlands. The mists gathered.

We flew well down—under the minus two thousand-foot level—so that out of the mists the highest dome peaks often passed close beneath us.

At 8 P.M. De Boer flung on the mechanism of invisibility. The interior of the ship faded to its gruesome green darkness. My senses reeled as the current surged through me. Lashed in my chair, I sat straining my adjusting eyes, straining my hearing to cope with this gruesome unreality. And my heart was pounding. Would Jetta and I succeed? Or was our love—unspoken love, born of a glance and the pressure of our hands in that moonlit Nareda garden—was our love star-crossed, foredoomed to tragedy? A few hours, now, would tell us.

De Boer was taking no chances. He was using his greatest intensity of power, with every safeguard for complete invisibility and silence. From where I sat I could make out the black form of Hans through the ceiling grid, at his pilot controls in the overhead cubby. A queer glow like an aura was around him. The same green radiance suffused the control room. It could not penetrate the opened windows of the ship; could not pass beyond the electro-magnetic field enveloping us. Nor could the curious hum which permeated the ship's interior get past the barrage barrier. From outside, I knew, we were invisible and inaudible.

Strange unreality, here in the control room! The black-garbed figures of De Boer and Jetta at their table were unreal, spectral. At the door oval, which I could barely see, Gutierrez lurked like a shadow. All of them, and Hans in the cubby above, were garbed in tight-fitting dead-black suits of silklene fabric. Thin, elastic as sheer silk web, opaque, lustreless. It covered their feet, legs and bodies; and their arms and hands like black, silk gloves. Their heads were

helmeted with it. And they had black masks which as yet were flapped up and fastened to the helmet above their foreheads. Their faces only were exposed, tinted a ghastly, lurid green by this strange light. It glowed and glistened like phosphorescence on their eyeballs, making them the eyes of animals in a hunter's torchlight, at night.

De Boer moved upon an errand across the control room. He was a burly black spectre in the skin-tight suit. His footfalls faintly sounded on the metal floor. They were toneless footfalls. Unreal. They might have been bells, or jangling thuds; they had lost their identity in this soundless, vibrating hum.

And he spoke, "We are making good progress, Jetta. We will be on time."

Ghastly voice! So devoid of every human timbre, every overtone shade to give it meaning, that it might have been a man's voice, or a woman's, the voice of something living, or something dead. Sepulchral. A stripped shell of voice. Yet to me, inside here with it, it was perfectly audible.

And Jetta said, "Yes, Hendrick, that is good."

A voice like his: no different.

Gruesome. Weird.

I try now to picture the scene in detail, for out of these strange conditions Jetta and I were to make our opportunity.

9 P.M. De Boer was a methodical fellow. He checked his position on the chart. He signalled the routine orders to Hans. And he gestured to Gutierrez. The movements and acts of everyone had been definitely planned. And this, too, Jetta and I had anticipated.

"Time to make him ready, Gutierrez. Bring the sack in here. I'll fasten him away."

I was not garbed like the others. They could move out on the wing runway under Hanley's eyes at short range, or climb in and out of the balloon car, and not be visible.

Gutierrez brought the sack. A dead-black fabric.

"Shall I cut him loose now from his chair,  
Commander?"

"I'll do it."

De Boer drew a long knife blade, coated black, and thin and sharp as a half-length rapier. Gutierrez had one of similar fashion. No electronic weapons were in evidence, probably because the hiss of one fired would have been too loud for our barrage, and its flash too bright. But a knife thrust is dark and silent!

The Spaniard's eyes were gleaming as he approached me with the bag, as though he were thinking of that silent knife thrust he would give me at the last.

Dr. Boer said, "Stand up, Grant." He cut the fastenings that held me in my chair. But my ankles and wrists remained tied.

"Stand up, can't you?"

"Yes."

I got unsteadily to my feet. In the blurred green darkness I could see that Jetta was not looking at me. Gutierrez held the mouth of the sack open. As though I were an upright log of wood, De Boer lifted me.

"Pull it up over his feet, Gutierrez."

The oblong sack was longer than my body. They drew it over me, and bunched its top over my head. And De Boer laid me none too gently on the floor.

"Lie still. Do you get enough air?"

"Yes."

The black fabric was sufficiently porous for me to breathe comfortably inside the sack.

"All right, Gutierrez, I have the gag."

I felt them carrying me from the control room, twenty feet or so along the corridor, where a door-porte

opened to a small balcony runway hung beneath the forward wing. Jutting from it was a little take-off platform some six feet by twelve in size. It was here that the balloon-basket was to be boarded. The casket containing the ransom gold would be landed here, and the sack containing me placed in the car and cast loose. It was all within the area of invisibility of our flyer.

De Boer knelt over me, and drew back the top of the sack to expose my face.

"A little gag for you, Grant, so you will not be tempted to call out."

"I won't do that."

"You might. Well, good-by, American."

"Good-by." And I breathed, "Good-by Jetta." Would I ever see her again? Was this the end of everything for us?



He forced the gag into my mouth, tied it, and verified that my ankles and wrists were securely lashed. In the green radiance he and Gutierrez were like ghouls prowling over me, and their muffled toneless voices, tomblike.

The sack came up over my head.

"Good-by, Grant." I could not tell which one said it. And the other chuckled.

I could feel them tying the mouth of the sack above my head. I lay stiff. Then I heard their steps. Then silence.

I moved. I might have rolled, but I did not try it. I could raise my knees within the sack—double up like a folded pocket knife—but that was all.

A long, dark silence. It seemed interminable. Was Gutierrez guarding me here in the corridor? I could not tell; I heard nothing save the vague hum of the electronite current.

It had been 9 o'clock. Then I fancied that it must be 10. And then, perhaps, almost 11. I wondered what the weather outside was like. Soon we would be nearing the meeting place. Would Hanley be there? Would Jetta soon, very soon now, be able to do her part? I listened, horribly tense, with every interval between the thumps of my heart seeming so long a gap of waiting.

I heard a sound! A toneless, unidentifiable sound. Another like it; a little sequence of faint sounds. Growing louder. Approaching footsteps? Jetta's? I prayed so.

Then a low voice. Two voices. Both the same in quality. But from the words I could identify them.

"Hello, Gutierrez."

"*Niña*, hello."

Jetta! She had come!

"The captive is safe? No trouble?"

"No. He has not moved."

"Careful of him, Gutierrez. He is worth a lot of money to us."

"Well you say it. Señorita. In half an hour now, we will be away. Santa Maria, when this is over I shall breathe with more comfort!"

"We'll have no trouble, Gutierrez. We're almost there. In ten minutes now, or a little more."

"So soon? What time is it?"

"Well, after half-past ten. When it's over, Gutierrez, we head for Cape Town. Clever of me, don't you think, to persuade Hendrick to take us to Cape Town? Just you three men to divide all this treasure. It would be foolish to let a hundred others have it."

"True, *Niña*; true enough."

"I insisted upon you and Hans—Gutierrez, what is that?"

A silence.

"I heard nothing."

"A voice, was it?"

"The Americano?"

"No! No—the commander calling? Was it? Calling you, Gutierrez? Perhaps we have sighted Hanley's Wasp. Go! I'll stand here, and come quickly back."

Footsteps. Now! Our chance, come at last! I twisted over on my side, and lay motionless. Ah, if only those were Gutierrez' fading footfalls! And Jetta, here alone with me in the green darkness! Just for this one vital moment.

Fingers were fumbling at the top of my sack, unfastening the cord. Hands and arms came swiftly in. Fingers ran down my back as I lay on my side to admit them quickly. Fingers went fumbling at the cords that lashed my crossed wrists behind me. A

knee pressed against me. A hurried, panting, half sobbing breath close over me—

Just a hurried moment. The hands withdrew. The sack went back over my head. The knees, the slight weight against me, was gone. A few seconds only.

Footsteps. The voices again.

"Was it the commander, Gutierrez?"

"No. I do not know what it was. Nothing, probably."

"The Wasp in sight?"

"Not yet, *Niña*. You had best go back: De Boer, he might be jealous of us, no? He is busy with his instruments, but should he realize you are here, talking with me—"

"Senseless, Gutierrez!"

"Is it so, *Niña*? I have no attraction? Go back to him. Gold I want, not trouble over you!"

Faint laughter.

"When we sight the Wasp, I'll call and tell you, Gutierrez. Too bad you won't let me stay with you. I like you."

"Yes. But go now!"

Faint laughter. Footsteps. Then silence.

Our vital moment had come and passed. And Jetta had done her part; the role of action upon this dim lurid stage was now mine to play.

My hands were free.

## **Chapter 18: The Combat in the Green Darkness**

Another interval. A dead, dark silence. I did not dare move. Gutierrez was here, within a few feet of me, probably. I wondered if he could see the outlines of the black sack. Doubtless they were very vague. But if I exposed my flesh, my face, my hands, that would at once attract his attention.

I worked the loosened cords from my wrists; moved my stiffened hands until, with returning blood, the strength came to them. I could not reach my bound ankles without doubling up my knees. I did not dare chance such a movement of the sack. But, after a moment, I got my hands in front of me.

Then I took the gag from my mouth and, with a cautious hand, pried at the top of the sack where it was bunched over my head. Its fastening was loose.

Another interval. A dim muffled voice; "The Wasp is in sight, Gutierrez!"

A movement—a sound like footsteps. Probably Gutierrez moving to the corridor window to glance at Hanley's distant hovering flyer. I hoped it might be that: I had to take the chance.

I slid the bag from my face. I feared an abrupt alarm, or Gutierrez leaping upon me. But there was silence, and I saw his vague dark outlines at the window oval, five feet from me.

I got my ankles loose and slid the bag off. I was unsteady on my feet, but desperation aided me.

Gutierrez half turned as I gripped him from behind. My hand on his mouth stifled his outcry. His black knife blade waved blindly. Then my clenched knuckle caught his temple, and dug with the twisting Santus blow. I was expert at it, and I found the vulnerable spot.

He crumpled in my grasp, and I slid his falling body across the narrow corridor into the nearest cubby oval.



Almost soundless; and in the control room Jetta and De Boer were murmuring and gazing at Hanley's ship, which hung ahead and above us at the zero-height.

I had planned all my movements. No motion was lost. Gutierrez was about my height and build. I stripped his black suit from him, donned it, then tied his ankles and wrists, and gagged him against the time when he would recover consciousness. Then I stuffed his body in the sack and tied its top.

This black suit had a mask, rolled up and fastened to the helmet. I loosed it, dropping it over my face. Knife in hand, I stood at the corridor window.

It was all black outside. The clouds were black overhead; the highest Lowland crags, several thousand feet beneath us, were all but blotted out in the murky darkness. Only one thing was to be seen: a quarter of a mile ahead, now, and a thousand feet higher than our level, the shining, bird-like outlines of Hanley's hovering little Wasp. It stood like a painted image of an aero, alone on a dead-black background. Red and green signal-lights dotted it, and on its stern

tip a small, spreading searchlight bathed the wings and the body with a revealing silver radiance.

Our forward flight had been checked, and we, too, were hovering. Hans doubtless would remain for a time in the pilot cubby; De Boer and Jetta were in the control room. It was only twenty feet away, but I could barely see its oval entrance.

"Gutierrez!"

One of them was calling. My hollow empty voice echoed back as I softly responded:

"Yes?"

"Be ready. We are arrived."

"Yes, Commander. All is well."

I continued to stand at the window. Hanley's little balloon-car was visible now. Then he cut it away. We had moved forward in the interval. The tiny car floated out almost above us.

My gaze searched the void of darkness outside. Did Hanley have an invisible flyer out there? Perhaps so. But it could accomplish nothing as yet. It would not even dare approach, for fear of collision with us.

The tiny car, with a white pilot light in it, swayed with a slow descent. The basket beneath the supporting balloon oscillated in a wide swing, then steadied. A sudden flash showed up there—a flashing electronic stream, from Hanley's Wasp to the basket. The shot swept the basket interior. No one could be hidden there and survive.

It was Hanley's proof to us that he was following instructions.

"Hah! He obeys properly, Jetta!"

The voice floated back to me from the control room. Could I creep in there, surprise De Boer now, and kill him? Doubtless. But it would alarm Hans. I must await my chance to get them together.

"Gutierrez! Hans, get us under it! Gutierrez!"

The vague outline of De Boer came toward me in the corridor, burly dark blob. His mask was down now. There were points of light, glowing like faint distant stars, to mark his eyes.

"Gutierrez."

"Yes."

A small black figure followed after him. Jetta.

"Yes, De Boer." I stood over the sack. "I am ready."

De Boer's giant shape towered beside me. Now! My knife thrust now! But Hans was coming toward us. He would take alarm before I could reach him.

"Open the side porte, Gutierrez. Hurry, the car is here. Hans, you should have stayed up there!"

"The drift is calculated; the car is just here."

We were all swift-moving shadows; disembodied voices.

"Get that porte open."

"Yes." I opened it.

We went outside on the runway. I passed close to Jetta, and just for an instant pressed my gloved fingers on the black fabric of her arm—and she knew.

"Now, seize it."

"Here, Hans, climb up."

"I have it. Pull it, Gutierrez!"

The car drifted at us from the black void. We caught it.

"Hold it, Gutierrez."

"Hans, clip the balloon. Up with you."

In the blurred haste, I could not get them together. I did not want to kill one and have the other leap upon me.

We fastened the little balloon and dragged the car onto the take-off platform. The shape of Hans leaped into the car.

"It is here! The ransom money!"

"Lift it to me. Heavy?"

"Yes."

"Gutierrez, help me. Hurry! If Hanley tries any trickery—"

Our aero was drifting downward and southward in the slight wind. Hanley's Wasp still hovered at the zero-height.

"In, Gutierrez."

Hans and I hauled out the heavy casket and placed it on the wing runway. De Boer pried up its lid. The gold was there. I could not tell where Jetta was; I prayed she would keep away from this.

Then the shape of De Boer was missing! But in a moment he appeared, dragging the sack.

"Lift him, Gutierrez. Hans, unclip the balloon and shove off the car!"

We were all standing at the two-foot rail of the runway. The car-basket, floating now, was off side and level with us. My chance!

"In with him, Gutierrez."

I shoved the body, encased in its black sack, with Hans helping me. And suddenly De Boer's knife came down at the sack! A stab. But an instinct to save the poor wretch within swept me. I struck at De Boer's arm and deflected the blow. The sack tumbled into the car.

I had neglected whatever chance had existed. Too late now!

"What in the hell!"

De Boer's shape seized me.

"What—"

It sent me into a sudden confusion. I flung him off. I stumbled against the shape of Hans.

The car was almost loose; drifting away.

Without thought—a frantic impulse—I pushed Hans over the brink. He fell into the car. It swayed into an oscillation with the impact. The balloon sank below our wing level and was gone, with only Hans, muffled shouts floating up.

And De Boer came leaping at me from behind. I whirled around. My danger was too much for the watching Jetta. She screamed.

"Philip, look out for him!"

"Hah! The American. By damn, what is this?"



It gave De Boer pause. He gripped a wing stay-wire for a second.

Then he came with a rush.

The corridor door was open behind me. I flung myself into it—and collided with a shape.

"Philip!"

I shoved at her frantically.

"Jetta, get back! Away from us!"

I pulled at her, half falling. De Boer's shape came through the doorway into the corridor. And was blotted out in the green darkness as he turned the other way, to avoid me if I struck.

A silence. The shadow of Jetta was behind me. I stood with poised knife, listening, straining my eyes through the faint green darkness. De Boer was here, knife in hand, fallen now into craftly, motionless silence. He might have been close here down the

corridor. Or in any one of these nearby cubby doorways.

I slid forward along the wall. The corridor was solid black down its length: the green radiance seemed brighter at the control room behind me. Had De Boer gone into this solid blackness, to lure me?

I

stopped my advance. Stood again, trying to see or hear something.

And then I saw him! Two small glowing points of light. Distant stars. His eyes! Five feet ahead of me? Or ten? Or twenty?

A rustle. A sound.

His dark form materialized as he came—a huge, black blob overwhelming me, his arm and knife blade striking.

I dropped to the floor-grid, and his blade went over me. And as I dropped, I struck with an upward thrust. My knife met solidity; sank into flesh.

I twisted past him on the floor as he fell. My knife was gone: buried in him.

Words were audible; choking gasps. I could see his form rising, staggering. The open porte was near him; he swayed through it.

Did he know he was mortally wounded? I think so. He swayed on the wing runway, and I slid to the door and stood watching. And was aware of the shadow of Jetta creeping to join me.

"Is he—?"

"Quiet, Jetta."

He stood under the wing, swaying, gripping a stay. Then his voice sounded, and it seemed like a laugh.

"The craven American—wins." He moved a step. "Not to see—me die—"

He toppled at the rail. "Good-by, Jetta."

A great huddled shadow. A blob, toppling, falling....

Far down there now the crags and peaks of the Lowland depths were visible. The darkness swallowed his whirling body. We could not hear the impact.

## **Chapter 19: Episode of the Lowlands**

There is but little remaining for me to record. I could not operate the mechanism of invisibility of De Boer's X-flyer. But its pilot controls were simple. With Jetta at my side, trembling now that our gruesome task was over, we groped our way through the green darkness and mounted to the pilot cubby. And within ten minutes I had lowered the ship into the depths, found a landing place upon the dark rocks, and brought us down.

Hanley's Wasp had landed: we saw its lights half a mile from us. And then the lights of another ship—an X-flyer convoying Hanley—slowly materializing nearby.

And then reunion. Jetta and I left De Boer's invisible vessel and clambered over the rocks. And presently Hanley, staring at our grotesque black forms, came rushing forward and greeted us.

We were an hour locating De Boer's flyer, for all that Jetta and I had just left it and thought we could find

our way back. But we stumbled onto it at last. Hanley felt his way aboard and brought it to visibility. It has since been returned to the Anti-War Department, with the compliments of Hanley's Office.

The ransom money was restored to its proper source. Spawn's treasure of radiumized quicksilver we shipped back to Nareda, where it was checked and divided, and Jetta's share legally awarded to her.

De Boer was dead when Hanley found him that night on the rocks. Jetta and I did not go to look at him....

The balloon basket landed safely. Hanley and his men were down there in time to seize it. Hans was caught; and Gutierrez, within the sack, was found to be uninjured. They are incarcerated now in Nareda. They were willing to tell the location of the bandit stronghold. A raid there the following day resulted in the capture of most of De Boer's men.

All this is now public news. You have heard it, of course. Yet in my narrative, setting down the events as I lived them, I have tried to give more vivid details

than the bare facts as they were blared through the public audiphones.

An episode of the strange, romantic, fantastic Lowlands. A very unimportant series of incidents mingled with the news of a busy world—just a few minutes of the newscasters' time to tell how a band of depth smugglers was caught.

But it was a very important episode to me. It changed, for me, a clanking, thrumming machine-made world into a shining fairyland of dreams come true. It gave me little Jetta.